

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE



STORY BY
**SYOUGO
KINUGASA**
ART BY
TOMOSEHUNSAKU



NOVEL

11



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SHINOZAKI SATSUKI

First year, Class C. In the volleyball club. When she first started school here, she and Ike clashed a great deal, but their relationship seems to be improving now.

SUDOU KEN

First year, Class C. In the basketball club. When he first started school here, he had quite a few issues and couldn't control his emotions. But now, he seems to have calmed down quite a bit.

IKE KANJI

First year, Class C. Not in any clubs. After making through a number of tests, he's shown significant growth.



SAKAYANAGI ARISU



"What's the matter?
What are you all
upset for?"

A wave of uneasiness
seemed to wash
over Ichinose. Well,
actually, neither
Sakayanagi nor I
had expected this to
happen either.



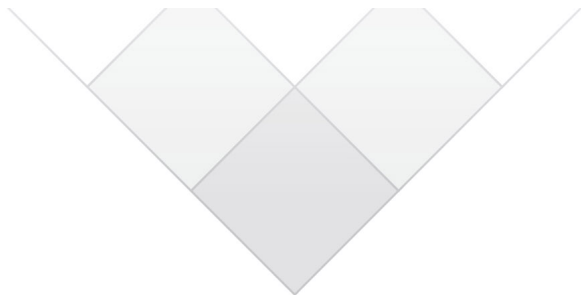
"...Ryuuen-kun?
Why...are you here...?"

CLASSROOM OF NOVEL 11 THE ELITE

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- POSTSCRIPT





CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 11



STORY BY

Syouto Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE VOL. 11
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Chapter 1: Sakayanagi Arisu's Soliloquy

I REMEMBER WHAT I SAW through the glass that day as well as if it had just been yesterday. My father had taken me to a facility deep in the mountains. The exterior of the facility was dyed a pure white. Actually, it wasn't just the exterior. I remember *everything* was painted white, including the corridors and the small room I was taken to.

I placed both my hands on the clear glass, and looked intently into the room on the other side. It seemed it was one-way glass, so whoever was on the other side couldn't see us.

"What's the matter, Arisu? It's rather unusual to see you so interested in something."

"This is an experiment to artificially create geniuses. How could I not be interested?"

"...That's not a very childlike thing to say, as usual." My father chuckled, though he sounded slightly perplexed, as he held me in his arms.

According to my father, anyone, no matter who they were, could be molded into an exceptional individual through the curriculum at this facility. No exceptions. I couldn't help but harbor some doubts about that.

"It's just...aren't there quite a few problems with this experiment?" I asked.

"Such as?"

"Well, from a humanitarian standpoint, it seems there's a lot to criticize about this experiment."

"Ha, ha ha..."

"More importantly, though, I can't imagine that it's possible to artificially create geniuses."

A person's potential is determined the moment they are born. The moment they come into this world. The product of chance. It just so happens to manifest in a variety of ways.

That's how the human world works. We can't do anything more than what is coded into our DNA. We awaken to things either through the blood of our ancestors, passed onto us, or through a mutation.

In other words, if you wished to create a genius, then you had no choice but to do it by manipulating DNA. If you were born an ordinary person, then an ordinary person you would stay, no matter how far their tactics went. No matter how privileged your environment, if you weren't an exceptional learner, you'd never become a genius.

Such had been my opinion ever since I was a young child. It was the conclusion I'd come to as someone who'd seen many classmates receive a prestigious education since their early years. This experiment stood in direct conflict with my views.

That being said...the DNA thing probably wasn't that simple.

"Even if someone does emerge from this facility as the best of the best, could you really say it was the result of the experiment, though?" I asked.

"What makes you think that?" asked my father.

"Because in the end, I think that the children who emerged to become the best of the best simply possessed superior DNA."

"I see. It's certainly true that the curriculum these children are undergoing is quite rigorous, which means it's possible the ones who make it through it are the ones who were superior to begin with. You really are quite intelligent, just like her. And your personalities are similar, too."

"That makes me happy to hear. Being compared to Mother is the highest possible praise."

After earnestly listening to what my father had to say, I turned to gaze once again at the children undergoing this experiment. Children with gifts and children without gifts were all being given the same education in equal measure. In this program, the ones who fell behind would disappear.

"Ultimately, even if there are children who make it through the curriculum, that just means they've been blessed with the talents of their parents," I added. I couldn't help but consider it a meaningless, albeit interesting, experiment.

"Well, maybe so, but maybe not. I don't know, myself. But I can't

discard the possibility that the children here may be destined to bear the future.”

Being a child, I couldn't understand all that my father's acquaintance was trying to accomplish. I directed my gaze back toward what was on the other side of the glass.

“...That child has been performing all his tasks calmly and without difficulty for a while now, wouldn't you say?” I observed.

All the children within my field of vision had completed their tasks now, but they'd all seemed to struggle desperately to finish. Well, I supposed that was natural. Whether in sports or academics, the competition in this place went far beyond a child's level.

In the midst of all of this, there was one who stood out rather prominently from the rest.

A young boy was playing chess, overwhelming his opponents one after another. Of all of the children I could see through the glass, he was the only one who captured both my gaze and my heart. My father nodded at the boy, looking somehow both happy and sad about something.

“Ah, yes. That's sensei's son, I believe. If I recall, his name is... Ayanokouji... Kiyotaka-kun,” said my father.

The “sensei” that my father referred to was one of his acquaintances, and the one who managed this facility. I remembered him seeming like a person who would bow to no one. My father behaved humbly when around him.

“I suppose if he's his child, then his DNA is superior after all, hm?” I replied.

“I'm not so sure about that. At the very least, it wasn't as though sensei came from a prestigious university. Nor is he an excellent athlete, by any means. His wife is truly ordinary, too. None of the child's grandparents possessed any outstanding talents, either. But sensei's aspirations were stronger than anyone else's, and he has an indomitable fighting spirit that made him refuse to give up. That's precisely why he became so great. So great, in fact, that there was a time when he could move the entire country,” said my father.

“I suppose that would make his child the perfect test subject for this experiment, wouldn't it?” I asked.

After hearing my question, my father nodded, looking conflicted.

"I suppose so... I suppose that to him, his boy would be the ideal child. But...I can't help but feel sorry for him."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"He's been in this facility from the moment he was born. The first thing he saw wasn't his mother or father, but the white ceiling of this facility. If he'd been eliminated from the program at an early stage, he could probably have gone on living with sensei. Well, no...I suppose it's precisely *because* he's stayed in the program that he continues to be favored by sensei. If that's the case, then that's quite..."

In other words, he'd received no love from his parents. It sounded like a lonely, isolated life. Talent aside, there was much to be gained through human contact.

I hugged my beloved father tightly. In response, my father hugged me back once again.

"The ultimate goal of this institution is to raise every child being instructed here to become a genius. But it's still in the experimental stage. This battle is focused on the next 50 to 100 years. The goal isn't simply for the children here to demonstrate their talents when they become adults, but rather, to go on to live for the sake of the children of the future. All the students here—both those who fell behind and those who stayed in the program—are nothing more than samples," said my father.

My father went on to tell me how the children would have nothing more than a lifetime of confinement in this facility, continuously being mined for data. He sounded somewhat pained as he spoke. I looked at his side profile.

"Father, do you hate this facility?" I asked.

"Hm? ...Well, I don't know... Honestly, I may not be able to support it. If the children raised here do really become superior to everyone else...if this facility becomes the norm... I think that may bode great misfortune," he replied.

"Please do not worry. I will destroy this facility. I will prove that genius is determined not through education, but at the moment of birth."

I could not be defeated by any of the children raised in this

facility, no matter who they might be. As someone who'd inherited superior DNA, I had to put a stop to this.

"You're right. I'll be expecting much from you, Arisu."

"By the way, Father. I was thinking of learning how to play chess..."

When I woke, I sat up in bed, still feeling sleepy.

"What a nostalgic dream..." I said to myself.

Perhaps it was because my showdown with Ayanokouji was approaching. Imagine recalling *that* day, of all days...

And yet...I've never forgotten the day you and I met. Never.

We would meet again someday. The day would come when we'd face one another. I was absolutely sure of it.

Chapter 2: The Teachers' Battle

IT WAS A CERTAIN DAY in February, shortly before the in-class voting exam was officially decided upon, and the teachers at the Advanced Nurturing High School were keeping busy. They were preparing for their students to advance to the next grade level, to graduate, to go on to university. Additionally, there was a final special exam for all grade levels. It was a busy time, made all the more complex by a variety of factors.

None of the teachers had the free time or wiggle room to do anything else. They were swamped, day in and day out. However, the teachers of the first-year students had a more complicated situation to deal with than those of the other grade levels.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, concludes what I have to say regarding the content of the final special exam for first-year students, as well as the new system that we’ll be introducing.”

A man had just finished explaining the final special exam of the year to the entire faculty. What he’d outlined was just the same as it always had been for the second- and third-years, but things were different for just first-years.

“If any instructors do have any questions, please, speak up,” he added, looking around at the teachers who were listening to his every word. The atmosphere in the room was tense and stiff.

The silence continued for several seconds.

“If I may, Acting Director Tsukishiro?” Mashima, first-year Class A’s instructor, raised his hand and broke through the stillness and silence that pervaded the faculty lounge.

Chabashira and Hoshinomiya both turned to look at Mashima at the same time. The man who’d just been referred to as Acting Director Tsukishiro had noticed the first-year homeroom instructors already had numerous doubts. Or rather, he knew there would be nothing to discuss if they had no doubts.

He was assessing their value, as people. As members of society,

adults, teachers working solely for a paycheck.

“What is it, Mashima-sensei, homeroom instructor for first-year Class A?” Tsukishiro, anticipating questions, spoke with a broad and gentle smile.

“While the criteria for the special exams for the second- and third-year students remain the same as in previous years, those of the exam for the first-year students greatly exceeds the annual average. This in-class voting exam...carries a high risk of expulsion.”

Mashima addressed Tsukishiro as an instructor in charge of first-year students, and for the sake of the children of the future, undaunted by the man’s title of acting director. He continued speaking, even more sternly than before.

“Please pardon my rudeness, but you’ve only just been appointed to your position, Acting Director Tsukishiro. While I’m sure you’ve made your decision based on what you’ve seen so far, I think it is unwise to do something that would forcibly expel students simply because no one has been expelled from the first-year classes yet.”

Tsukishiro seemed somewhat pleased by Mashima’s question...or rather, by his protest. He flashed his white teeth.

“Carries a strong risk of expulsion, you say. Haven’t the students already been in danger of expulsion in every special exam they’ve had up until this point? Isn’t there a rule at this institution that even a single failing grade results in expulsion? Surely no normal high school would have such a strict system.”

“I am pointing out how unreasonable this is. Though, yes, it is certainly true that students who fail to achieve a certain quality of results will be expelled. The system is not meant to be an easy one. In fact, we’ve had a number of students be expelled every year.”

Various special exams were held every year at this school, all within the scope of certain set criteria. And, while working within those limits, the current first-years had made it through without anyone getting expelled. It was unclear whether this was simply due to a difference in ability from the other grade levels, but there had to be a reason for why they’d managed to come this far without anyone being expelled.

Mashima thought that it was important to make the most of this and carry it into the next year. However, Tsukishiro thought differently.

“If it’s simply a matter of having some students be expelled, then what difference does it make to do it this way?” he asked.

“No. This is very clearly different from what has been done in the past. I cannot support a system where students are forcibly expelled,” said Mashima.

The other teachers remained silent. Only Mashima persisted, and quite tenaciously so.

“Besides, abruptly introducing a new system just before the final special exam of the school year? Never in this school’s history has such a thing been done. The reasons such a decision was made have not been explained to us.”

The teachers knew all along that Mashima’s resistance was futile. There was no reversing this decision. There was no way to go back.

“It would seem your way of thinking is a little...shall we say ‘by the book,’ Mashima-sensei? Have you considered the possibility that the way things have been done so far wasn’t *correct*? Rather, that it was *wrong*?” asked Tsukishiro.

He and Mashima continued to go back and forth in the faculty lounge. However, Mashima’s disadvantageous position was as clear as day. This wasn’t a situation a mere teacher could control.

“Young children can really absorb more than adults think that they can. With that point in mind, I have decided not to administer the new test to the second- and third-years, but only to the first-years, who have yet to be fully immersed in this school’s methods. If the initiative is successful, it will make it easier to try it with next year’s first-year students.”

“The current first-year students have made it this far without any expulsions. Do you really want to put an end to that in this manner?” asked Mashima.

“Current results mean nothing. This is about being future-oriented. *Future-oriented*,” countered Tsukishiro, before continuing with his speech. “The government is expecting a great many things from this school—a newly established institution that employs a number of experimental ventures. The school’s short history is precisely why I think that we should try a variety of methods.”

“It’s all well and good to be future-oriented. However, this could

also be interpreted as us using the current first-years as guinea pigs. As a homeroom instructor, I find this unacceptable.” Mashima continued to directly challenge Tsukishiro. He wanted to do *something* to make the special exam change course.

But it was almost certainly impossible to undo Tsukishiro’s decision. The in-class voting exam was already a done deal.

“...Mashima-sensei, that’s enough.” Chabashira, fully aware the die was cast, stopped Mashima from saying any more.

Mashima swallowed the words that were about to leave his mouth. However, none other than Tsukishiro himself urged him to speak again.

“Please, I don’t mind. If there’s something you wish to say, please, get it off your chest. After all, I well understand you teachers’ feelings of apprehension about this. Wouldn’t you agree, Mashima-sensei?”

“Are you saying that there is a possibility that you will reconsider?” said Mashima, asking if the special exam would be re-evaluated.

It seemed as though Tsukishiro was dangling a lifeline for them to seize. But it wasn’t true. Unlike Director Sakayanagi, Acting Director Tsukishiro had not the slightest intention of listening to what anyone had to say.

“Reconsider, hm? Well, that would be difficult. While my position, as the ‘acting’ part of my title suggests, is temporary, I *am* still the director. But though the director bears the responsibility of steering the school and establishing its guiding principles, he is simultaneously a puppet. I am nothing more than an employee of a higher, government-backed corporate body,” replied Tsukishiro.

And with that, Mashima’s resistance was rendered meaningless. All that mattered was the future of the Advanced Nurturing High School. The teachers’ feelings were secondary.

“So you don’t mind if students are expelled in droves as a result of these strict rules?”

“Those who do not conform will be eliminated. That’s just how society—no, that’s just how the natural order works. Besides, we’ve already compromised by allowing the introduction of ‘Protection Points,’ have we not? I’m afraid you’re just going to have to be satisfied

with this.”

The strained atmosphere gradually began to fade and become more relaxed. The prolonged morning meeting was nearing its end.

“More importantly, though, the current director, Sakayanagi-shi, is currently under house arrest due to allegations of fraud. If these allegations are found to be based in truth, we cannot inherit educational policies built by such a person, can we? Of course, I sincerely hope they will be cleared up as soon as possible, and that he will return,” said Tsukishiro.

He brought his hands together. *Clap!* With that, Tsukishiro looked around at all of the instructors.

“Well, it would seem time is up. Why don’t we call things here? Oh, that reminds me. We’ve been looking into whether we can hold a cultural festival at this school next year. I’m sure we will be looking to you, the teachers, for your opinions on the matter once again, so please share your thoughts when the time comes.”

“Cultural festival? Anything that would open this school up to the general public should generally be dismissed on principle.”

This time, even the second-year and third-year homeroom instructors started to voice their concerns.

“That kind of old-fashioned thinking is quite problematic, too. I believe that this school must institute as many changes as are necessary for it to become more recognized by the nation. We’ll need to be very selective about who we invite, of course, but there’s no need to worry about that. We won’t be opening the school up to the general public, but rather, to a strictly controlled group of people who are well-acquainted with this institution, such as politicians. This way, we avoid any major leaks of information to the outside world. At any rate, I would like for you to consider this matter in a positive frame of mind.”

Acting Director Tsukishiro noted that was all there was to say on the matter and brought the meeting to a close. The teachers’ battle had ended.

There was nothing they could have done.

2.1

“**M**ASHIMA-SENSEI, Hoshinomiya-sensei. Do you have a minute?” asked Chabashira, calling to her colleagues in the faculty lounge, just after Tsukishiro left but before classes began.

The three of them were former rivals who’d both worked and studied hard at this school, mutually pushing each other to improve. They were also close friends. Since they’d known each other for a long time, Chabashira’s colleagues gathered their papers and followed her without asking questions. They exited into the hallway that led to the classrooms where their students waited for them.

“This is so depressing. I can’t believe we have to tell our students that we’re having an exam where someone will definitely be expelled,” said Hoshinomiya, the first

to speak up. She looked down at her attendance records, letting out a heavy sigh. “I wonder who we’re going to lose...”

She didn’t sound at all like she was looking forward to finding out, but rather like she was just trying to face the reality of the situation.

“Well, it’s not like it’s been decided someone will be leaving, right? While there aren’t many options available, there *is* something they can do.”

“You mean spending twenty million points to override the expulsion? Isn’t that the only way?” replied Hoshinomiya.

Despite saying that, Hoshinomiya was already well aware of the truth. Right now, none of the classes had that many points saved up.

“If there’s any saving grace here, it’s not having to pay up the three hundred class points. I suppose there’s no precedent for a forced expulsion like this. In that sense, it’s only natural.”

Normally, twenty million Private Points and three hundred class points were required to override a student’s expulsion. This time, however, students were exempt from the Class Point requirement. Still, neither the teachers nor the students could just accept the forced expulsion as things were.

"I can't help but feel dissatisfied with Acting Director Tsukishiro's way of doing things," said Chabashira.

"Well, it's understandable that you'd feel that way, Sae-chan. He just came in out of nowhere and started doing whatever absurd thing he pleased," said Hoshinomiya, snuggling up close to Chabashira, as if she was about to hug her. Chabashira pushed her away, annoyed.

"Even if we complain, though, it won't change anything. If we say too much, it's likely *we'll* get axed," said Mashima.

"Are you for real, Mashima-kun? You were really going at it earlier with the acting director, weren't you? I was feeling, like, super extra nervous. But despite that, now you're all like, oh, we can't say too much?"

"You're right, Chie. The acting director probably doesn't care if teachers get fired. He knows there are plenty of replacements out there. If anything, he might even see it as convenient."

"Maybe he's planning to get rid of teachers who oppose him, like Mashima-kun, and replace them with ones more suited to his cause."

Chabashira and Hoshinomiya thought Tsukishiro's speech back in the faculty lounge might have been part of a ploy to root out rebellious teachers. Mashima didn't speak up to contradict that line of thinking.

"You be careful too, Sae-chan. Now that you've gotten a big win by moving on up to Class C, don't do anything reckless, okay?" said Hoshinomiya.

"You seem awfully relaxed, even though my class is moving on up."

"No way! Sae-chan, wait. You're not, like, under the illusion that you can move up to Class A, are you?"

Hoshinomiya's big eyes peered at Chabashira, who averted her gaze. Although Hoshinomiya tended to say whatever came into her head, many of her actions were carefully calculated. Chabashira, having known her for a long time, understood that quite well.

"...No. It's not like I'm *that* foolish," said Chabashira.

"Yeah, that's true. Whew, if you did say that you were aiming for Class A though...That would've just totally blown my mind!" said Hoshinomiya, waving her hands in front of her, showing how shocked she was.

Even though it was a silly, innocent conversation between girlfriends, Mashima couldn't bring himself to just stand there and watch. It was like two apex predators facing off on the savannah. It was an eat-or-be-eaten battle.

"Are you two still fighting over what happened back then? Even though years have pass—"

"Mashima-kun. It doesn't matter how much time has passed."

"That's right. It has nothing to do with it."

He'd tried to step in and mediate, but they forced him back down with a glare. Mashima had boldly stood up to Tsukishiro, but there were some opponents he couldn't hope to defeat.

"...I see. Well, while it may not be my place to say anything here, don't bring your personal feelings into this, okay?" said Mashima.

"We won't. Right, Chie?"

"Yeah, of course we won't. Right, Sae-chan?"

Even though they were trying to probe each other, to sense what the other was feeling, on the surface they both pretended nothing was wrong.

"Anyway, what I wanted to say was that you should refrain from acting carelessly," said Chabashira, quickly wrapping up their conversation before heading off toward Class C, clearly in a bad mood now.

"You really aren't going to bring personal feelings into this, are you?" asked Mashima as the two of them watched her leave.

"Don't lump me in with her, Mashima-kun. I have no lingering regrets at all, personally. But honestly, that girl hasn't changed, like, at all since then. She's just the same as she was when we were students. That's why she's still clinging to that good-for-nothing first love of hers, holding it in her heart," said Hoshinomiya.

"...You're kind of making a scary face."

"Huh? Ugh, no way, really? I am?" Hoshinomiya quickly pulled out a folding mirror and donned a smile. "All right! I look super-duper cute today, too. Don't you think so?"

"Don't care."

"Meanie. Well, it's all right, though."

After she'd put her mirror away, Mashima gave Hoshinomiya a piece of advice.

"Just don't let them pull the rug out from under you. This year's Class D... no, Class C, I suppose, is different from years past."

While there was still a gap in class points between the classes, not even the teachers could predict how future special exams would go.

"You might be right about that. But don't worry. I've got Ichinose-san on my side. And besides..."

"Besides?"

"If they do come up, then I'll just crush them directly."

"A teacher shouldn't be meddling in a competition between students though, should she?" asked Mashima.

"Oh, no, I'd never do that. I'm just saying that I won't show any mercy to Sae-chan," said Hoshinomiya, adding that she wouldn't go so far as to pick a fight with other teachers, either.

"You seem pretty serious."

"Well, that's because I can't let myself lose against Sae-chan."

Such had been the nature of their relationship, ever since their days as students. As friends and rivals both.

Chapter 3:

The Final Battle of The First Year

IT WAS March 8.

In Class C, Chabashira was about to begin the final special exam of the first year of school. There were thirty-nine chairs and desks for each of the students in Class C. There had been forty chairs and desks just up until a little while ago, of course, but now one was missing.

Yamauchi Haruki had been expelled.

It wasn't just Class C, either. Manabe from Class D and Yahiko from Class A had been expelled as well. There was no doubt the event had been a huge shock to the first-years. "There must be some way to save them," everyone had thought, in the back of their minds. But now that thought had been shattered.

The days continued to march forward without stopping, without the students recovering from their shock and heartbreak. At the same moment that the bell signaling the start of homeroom sounded, Chabashira strode into the room. There was no idle chit-chat in the classroom.

"...Well, then. Without further ado, I'll announce the details of the final special exam for your first year," said Chabashira, launching into her explanation for the exam.

I'd known things would end up this way, but I didn't hear a single word about Yamauchi. Ike and Sudou, his best friends, were probably trying their absolute hardest to accept the reality of the situation.

"In the final special exam, you will be asked to show the culmination of everything you've learned over this past year. Intelligence, physical ability, cooperation, and luck. You'll need to demonstrate your potential in every field."

Normally, Ike would have immediately started peppering Chabashira with questions and expressing his doubts. But now, he was quietly listening to her explanation. He was probably feeling a sense of impending crisis—fearing that he might very well be the next to get expelled.

“This special exam is called the ‘Event Selection Exam.’ The classes will compete with another, based on their overall performance. Which class you will be facing off against will be decided according to the rules. This will be just like the Paper Shuffle.”

The Event Selection Exam, huh? I’d been wondering what kind of exam we were in for.

“To make it easier for you to understand what I’m saying, I’m going to use these ten white cards and a number of yellow cards, which correspond to the number of people in class.”

As Chabashira spoke, she started lining cards up on the blackboard. Each card was roughly the same size as a regular playing card. While the ten white cards seemed blanked, the yellow cards, on the other hand, had one student’s name on each of them.

A total of forty-eight cards had been placed up on the blackboard. If the number of yellow cards was meant to match the number of students in our class, though, then she was short one card. I wondered if that meant something.

“First, I’ll explain what these ten blank white cards are about. On these cards, you will be asked to list a total of ten separate ‘events’ that you have jointly discussed and decided upon.”

As soon as she said that, everyone could see Ike develop a somewhat strained look. Chabashira, seeing him trying his hardest to keep his mouth shut, called out to him, sounding somewhat amused.

“If there’s something bothering you, I don’t mind if you ask questions. Okay?”

“W-well, but... it’s just, don’t you usually get mad if we talk too much when you’re explaining, sensei?” he asked in return.

It was obvious he was feeling shaken.

“Well, I won’t be able to rest at ease until you go ahead and get your interruption over with.”

Chabashira generally took questions at the end. But this time around, she was allowing Ike to speak up halfway through her explanation. Many of our classmates fixed their gazes upon Ike, who looked perplexed, but proceeded to go ahead and voice his concerns.

“Well, um... It’s just...events? What’s that about?” he asked.

“A written exam. Shogi. Cards. Baseball. You can go ahead and write in whatever events you think you can win at. Also, you’ll have to establish rules for the events and how to decide who wins.”

“Huh? So, we’re free to pick whatever?”

Even though Chabashira had just told us we could write in anything we wanted, it seemed like the message hadn’t quite sunk in for Ike and some other students.

“You are free to choose whatever you like, but there are some rules to follow when deciding which events you settle on. For instance, if you choose an obscure sport or some kind of game that not many people have heard of, then no one aside from the person who proposed the event stands much of a chance of winning. Moreover, the rules of the event must be fair and easy to understand. Therefore, after an event is submitted, the school will judge whether it is appropriate and will be implemented.”

True enough. If we picked extremely niche events like obscure sports or peculiar games, or set bizarre rules, then not many people would stand a chance of winning said events. But did we get to decide all the rules of these events?

“Also, you will need to fine-tune the rules to ensure there will be no draws. For example, *Go* ends in a draw if both sides have the same score at the end of the game. To avoid this outcome, you could specify that the white side gets an extra half point for going second, and thus wins,” explained Chabashira. “You might think at first glance that there’s no way a game like shogi could end in a draw, but there are rare instances in which both kings enter their respective promotion zones at the same time. In such a case, the result would be a draw, and the winner could be decided based on the number of pieces each player has on the board. You will be asked to draw up detailed rules to determine who wins and loses in advance. If you submit an event without such rules in place, then it will not be accepted.”

So, events where there would be a clear winner and loser, and nothing that was too obscure, huh? Even though you might say the students had countless choices at our disposal, this actually seemed to narrow down the events we could select.

“All right, then. Let’s see if we can illustrate this with a real-life scenario. Something easy to understand. Ike, what are you good at? It can be anything, so just come out and say it.”

“Um... What *am* I good at...?” said Ike, thinking to himself.

It seemed nothing was coming immediately to his mind.

“Well, uh, I guess I’m pretty good at stuff like Rock Paper Scissors?” he concluded, after giving it some thought.

His classmates couldn’t hold back their laughter at such a ridiculous statement. However, Chabashira took his answer seriously, writing the words “Rock Paper Scissors” on one of the white cards.

“Then let’s say we choose Rock Paper Scissors as an event,” she replied.

Ike, who hadn’t imagined she would take his response seriously, looked dumbfounded, along with the rest of our classmates.

“What about the rules?” asked Chabashira.

“Um... First to get three wins?” replied Ike.

Chabashira wrote Ike’s rule underneath the Rock Paper Scissors card.

“This event is known to many, and the rules are simple and clear. There’s not a single reason why the school wouldn’t accept it,” she replied.

“S-she accepted it.”

Even though it was an event that Ike just randomly blurted out, from the school’s point of view, it was perfectly acceptable.

“Now we just repeat this process nine more times, and we’ll have our ten-event total,” said Chabashira.

She picked up a piece of chalk and began writing on the blackboard.

“This is the exam schedule. This is also quite important. The exam will be divided into three major stages.”

Special Exam

MARCH 8: Special exam announcement date. Class match-ups also decided on this day.

MARCH 15: Confirmation of selection of ten events. The ten events chosen by the opposing class and their rules will be announced.

MARCH 22: Day of Event Selection Exam

“B-but sensei, if we’re doing twenty events, won’t that take a lot of time?”

“On the day of the Event Selection Exam, each class will narrow their respective list of ten events down to five and submit those five as their main choices. So instead of twenty events, the choices will be narrowed down to ten,” explained Chabashira.

After hearing that part, Horikita opened her mouth to speak.

“Which means that five of the ten events are bluffs... They’re meant to mislead our opponents. Right?”

“Yes, I suppose that they can play that role, too. Of that narrowed-down list of ten events, the school will select seven at random via an automated system. That’s how this all works,” replied Chabashira, not disregarding but rather affirming Horikita’s suggestion.

It seemed this special exam was going to be more drawn-out than the ones we’d had thus far. I imagined the school was going with seven events to ensure a clear winner. With no chance of a tie, whoever won four of the events would emerge victorious.

“Even if the outcome is already decided before all seven events are complete, the test will continue until the final event. This is because the events will affect class points. So, regardless of whether your class might definitely win or definitely lose, you will be seeing these events through to the very end. Applications for the first list of ten events will be accepted until the end of the day on Sunday the 14th. Because your events will need to be evaluated for approval by the school, you’re better off finalizing each event as soon as possible,” explained Chabashira.

“What happens if we don’t finalize ten events by the end of the 14th?”

“Then the school will fill in the gaps with alternative events that they’ve had prepared. But don’t expect these to be the best events for your class. While you may not necessarily be at a disadvantage in them, you probably won’t be at an advantage, either,” replied Chabashira.

It seemed it would be wisest for us to work on finalizing our own ten selections, no matter what.

“It’s also important to note that the same class cannot register the same event twice. Let’s suppose a class were to submit a soccer event,

with a best-two-out-of-three rule. If you then tried to submit another soccer event where the outcome was decided via a penalty kick, it would be rejected. Please be mindful of this.”

“Can we retract an event once it’s been finalized?” asked Horikita.

“No, you cannot.”

“Then...can any student participate in the seven events? And is it possible for students to participate as many times as they wish?” asked Horikita.

“Some of the rules regarding these events are difficult to communicate verbally. Therefore, the school has prepared this handout with more detailed information. Feel free to make copies of it later. The answers you’re looking for are printed on the handout, Horikita.”

It would have been nice if the school had just made enough copies for everyone, but I supposed it was possible they’d intentionally done things this way. If we only had one copy of the handout, everyone in class would come together to read it over, which would make it easier to prompt discussion among our classmates.

“Just as I wrote on the blackboard, the ten events each class decides upon will be relayed to the opposing classes on the 15th. After all, it’s hard to call it a fair competition if you don’t know what events and rules your opponents have chosen.”

That meant we had almost one week to study, practice, and come up with plans for these events. It was also likely that the day of the exam itself would become a battle for each class to figure out what events the opposing class preferred.

“Once the exam has concluded on the 22nd, the 23rd will be a vacation day. After that, the graduation ceremony will be held on the 24th, and then the closing ceremony on the 25th. Once those events are out of the way, you’ll officially be on spring break.”

I supposed our levels of motivation would depend on whether we won or lost. At any rate, after hearing all of that, I felt I had a fairly good grasp on how the Event Selection Exam worked.

However...

The look on Chabashira’s face seemed to suggest she still had something major to explain to us.

“There’s one other important piece of the puzzle here, aside from

deciding upon the events. And that is the fact that you are going to need a ‘commander’ to manage this many people. Please keep in mind that this commander will not be able to participate in events directly.”

“A commander...?”

So *that’s* why there were only thirty-eight student cards up on the board, huh?

“It’s an important job, and one that requires adaptability. You can interpret this position as a supporting role—someone who assists with all the events and provides lifelines when necessary. They can, for example, substitute for another student, or solve a difficult problem. This isn’t limited to sports, either. Even in events like Go and Shogi, the commander will be allowed to intervene,” said Chabashira.

That meant this wasn’t simply a showdown between students based on their fundamental skills. The commanders played a role too, huh?

“You must also decide how your commander will get ‘involved.’ Ah, yes. Say, for example, if we went with Rock Paper Scissors... You could come up with rules such as ‘The commander may volunteer to step in and participate once, when they wish,’ or ‘The commander can substitute for another student who is about to play.’ Determine the methods your commander may use to step in,” she explained.

It sounded like the commander’s involvement was generally accepted as long as it was fair. If we gave the commander the ability to swap out players in events like baseball and soccer, it would essentially be assigning them the role of coach. Although there were seven events, it was likely that the commander’s involvement was going to be a major point of consideration.

“Commanders will be granted private points individually in the case that they help secure a victory. But they’ll also be held responsible for defeat. That’s right. If their class is defeated, the commander will be expelled,” explained Chabashira.

So, someone was going to be forcibly expelled this time around, too.

“In this special exam, having a commander is absolutely essential. If the commander is not present, the test will not be allowed to proceed. If you have trouble trying to come to a decision on your own through discussion, come talk to me. I will appoint someone appropriate for the

role.”

And we had to nominate someone, just like before. It seemed likely the Protection Point that I got from the last test would play a big role here. I could tell that a lot of people’s eyes and feelings were being directed at me. The Protection Point was the only feasible option we had for nullifying an expulsion. Since I had one, if they appointed me commander, that meant I could avoid getting expelled even if we lost.

It was just that...

Was it okay for me to take on the role of commander to ensure no one got expelled? Or should we ask a talented student like Horikita to take the role, trying to increase our chances of winning, even if it was just by one percent? I was guessing my classmates would be fine with either choice. They probably wouldn’t object if someone other than me accepted the role, either. If no one wanted to volunteer for the role, on the other hand, their expectations would fall on me.

“How will our opponents be decided?” asked Horikita.

“The students who have taken on the role of commander will all gather together in the multi-purpose room after class today. We’ll hold a lottery for those students to be able to choose their opponent. You’ll have to discuss among yourselves in advance about which class you’d choose if you win the lottery.”

It sounded like the winner of the lottery would get to select the class they wanted to go up against, leaving the two remaining classes to be automatically matched up with one another.

“Then, we obviously gotta go with Class D, right? Our chances of winning against them will be higher.”

“It’s certainly true that going up against students currently languishing in Class D might increase your chances of winning, due to their overall inferiority. However, it’s not necessarily an advantage to fight against a lower-level class,” said Chabashira.

In other words, if that were true, then the three other classes would inevitably want to pick Class D. Now that Ryuen had fallen from power, Class D would be the easiest opponent to go up against.

“Chemistry matters in this exam. It’s very important that you take each class’s distinctive characteristics into account.”

We didn’t necessarily need to despair, even if we were competing

against Class A or Class B. If we chose an event favorable to our class, we'd have a good chance of winning. But the unavoidable truth was that the higher the level of the class, the tougher of an opponent they'd be. Despite what Chabashira had just said, not a single person in class cracked a smile.

Horikita's imagination was running wild, too. She was wondering if we could beat Class A or Class B if we challenged them as we were now.

"It seems what I said wasn't much of a comfort. In that case, let's look at some harsh truths. If you're defeated, and Class D wins... That means you'll fall into last place again."

Chabashira picked up a piece of chalk and wrote out the current Class Point totals.

Class points as of March 1

Class A: 1001 Points

Class B: 640 Points

Class C: 377 Points

Class D: 318 Points

Class C and Class D were neck and neck in terms of class points. We had managed to make our way up to Class C over the course of this year, but if we lost at the very last minute, then we'd be sent back down to Class D. That meant, as students, we'd want to keep our position at all costs.

"As for how these events will affect your class points... You'll see an increase or decrease of thirty points per event. So if you win all seven events, that means you get two hundred and ten points. If you win five events and lose two, you'll get ninety points. The points come from the opposing class's total. In addition, the school will award you another one hundred points as a reward for overall victory," explained Chabashira.

Which meant we could earn a maximum of three hundred and ten points. The fact that we could snatch class points from our opponents through winning these events was another major upside. Until now, we'd had no way to make much of a dent in the class point totals of the upper-level classes, even if we wanted to. But now, it was possible for us to knock them down in one fell swoop. Depending on the match-up

and the results, there was a sufficient chance of us either moving up to Class B or being knocked back down to Class D.

“In the event that the opposing class lacks the sufficient number of class points, the school will temporarily make up the difference, but require the class to eventually reimburse them for those points. This means a class may appear to have zero points on the surface, but will actually have a negative class point total,” explained Chabashira.

So it was possible for class points to drop below zero, albeit in an invisible manner. At any rate, since every class had over two hundred and ten points at present, that didn’t seem like something we needed to worry about.

3.1

WHEN CHABASHIRA LEFT, we had a little time left before class began. Some students went up and picked up the rules handout that had been left on the podium.

“May I have a moment?” asked Horikita, squeezing between them to take pictures of the rules with her cell phone. She was probably taking the initiative to do that so she could calmly look over the rules from her seat.

I remained seated at my own desk and watched everything.

“I can show you, too. Though you might not be interested,” said Horikita.

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness,” I replied.

Immediately after that, she sent me two pictures via text message.

EVENT SELECTION EXAM

Rules for Selecting Events:

Events that are too obscure, are too complex, or have exceedingly detailed rules may not be allowed. In the case of events with written questions, the school will provide the test questions to ensure fairness. Deviating from or altering the basic rules of the events is strictly prohibited.

Regarding usable facilities:

On the day of the special exam, the commanders will carry out their duties from the multi-purpose room. Additionally, school facilities such as the gymnasium, the sporting grounds, the music rooms, and the science labs may be used, though there are some exceptions.

Regarding event restrictions and time restrictions:

Duplicate events will not be accepted. If an event is determined to have the same content as a previously submitted event, it will not be accepted. Also, if an event is determined to take too long to complete or has no time limit whatsoever, it may not be accepted.

Regarding the number of participants:

The required number of participants for each of the ten submitted

events must be different, excluding those acting as substitutes. The minimum required number of participants is one, while the maximum number of participants must not exceed twenty (including those acting as substitutes). Only a maximum of two events that require more than ten participants per class (including substitutes) may be submitted.

Regarding conditions for participation:

Each student may only participate in one event. Students may not participate in two or more events. However, if every student from a class has already participated in an event, then a student will be allowed to participate in more than one event.

Regarding the role of commander:

The commander has the right to be involved in all seven events. Exactly how the commander is involved will be determined by the class that proposed the event. The scope of this involvement must be approved by the school before the event is adopted.

The rules were roughly divided into six sections.

The number of participants could range from one person to twenty people per event. And while events that actually required twenty participants were probably quite limited, there were some options you could come up with, depending on your approach. If you managed to come up with two events that required close to forty people, then it was possible that some students would have to participate a second time, maybe even a third time.

Even if you tried to narrow your selections down to an elite few, though, that got tricky when you had to ensure that the required number of people for each event was different.

“The school really has prepared quite a difficult special exam for us, haven’t they?”

“Yeah. But as something that’s supposed to be a culmination of everything we’ve learned over our first year, I guess this is pretty appropriate.”

It was a system where many students had to participate and work together if they were going to win. It was similar to the sports festival, but this time around, it wasn’t like physical ability alone would give you an advantage. Depending on your approach, it was possible to turn this into a battle focused on only academic ability, or a test of

intelligence or other mental faculties.

The key to the test likely wasn't just being able to discern your own strengths and weaknesses, but also those of the other classes. After giving the event selection process some thought, I concluded that the amount of time the school had given us was adequate. We were going to have to engage in a considerable amount of discussion and be extremely careful with our selections if we wanted to do our absolute best.

Furthermore, there were some students I doubted would actually participate in the events. If we couldn't get everyone in class to participate in an event at least once, we couldn't get anyone to participate a second time, forcing us to adjust accordingly. Now that she understood everything, Horikita looked a little displeased.

"Looks like you've got some issues with this special exam," I told her.

"Yes, several. The thing I'm most displeased about is the fact that the winner is largely determined by which class has more events chosen on the day of the exam. We'll be at a significant disadvantage if the events that our opponents prepared are favored over ours," she replied.

We'd only have absolute confidence in the events we prepared ourselves. Naturally, we'd want to compete in our own events rather than the other class's.

"Wouldn't it be much fairer if the school simply created ten events and presented them to each class, then narrowed them down to seven events on the day of the exam?" she added.

I supposed that if you looked at the situation from a fairness standpoint, Horikita was correct.

"That only reduces the odds of the lower-level classes winning, though. We should probably be grateful for this test, since if we're lucky, we'll be able to beat the higher-level classes," I reasoned. It was a reasonable assumption that the higher a class's level, the better its prospects were.

"That's... Well, I suppose that's one way you can look at it, but...I really don't like this test, after all," said Horikita.

Be that as it may...

This was the time for us to begin discussions and figure out our

events. But Hirata kept his head hung low, not moving an inch, simply waiting for time to pass.

“He was the person everyone rallied around until just the other day,” I observed aloud.

“Are you saying that it’s my fault?” snapped Horikita.

“Dunno.”

This was Hirata’s personal problem, but it was unclear how much anyone understood what was wrong... including Hirata himself.

As Hirata remained completely motionless, it was Sudou who spoke up, right as the class was about to begin discussion.

“Hey everyone. Before we get into discussion, there’s just one thing I wanna clear up.” He glanced briefly at me, then went back to looking out at the rest of the class. “Well, lots of people weren’t really all that happy with the results of the last test. Right, Kanji?”

“...Well, I dunno if I’d say that I’m unhappy with what happened and all, but it’s just like, I don’t really get it. I mean, I just wonder, how did Ayanokouji get the most praise votes? I think everyone’s wondering about that. And, like, why did he get forty-two votes?” said Ike.

Many pairs of eyes had now fallen on me. Even the people in the Ayanokouji Group were looking my way.

“You mean, like...he got a lot of praise votes from the other classes, right?”

There had been no time for explanations or excuses at the end of February. I’d anticipated that I’d be inundated with these kinds of questions, but I couldn’t exactly hold forth at length on the subject. My social standing in the class was low. I wasn’t in a position to talk openly about anything.

“About that. I’ll explain what happened,” said Horikita, taking the lead.

“Wait. We want to hear an explanation from Ayanokouji. We... lost a buddy, y’know?” said Ike.

“That might not be possible,” replied Horikita, standing up, beginning to cover for me.

“Not... possible? What?”

“Because this is probably something that even Ayanokouji-kun

himself doesn't fully understand," said Horikita.

"...Ayanokouji didn't know?"

"Exactly. Put simply, everything was orchestrated by Sakayanagi-san. I have my own theory as to why she did it. I'll explain that, too."

Horikita continued to run through the situation, point by point, framing everything in an easy-to-understand manner.

"First, she targeted Yamauchi-kun, telling him to rest easy, because she'd be giving him praise votes. There can be no doubt about that part, since Yamauchi said it himself in the end. But secretly, she'd probably decided to give the votes to a different student," said Horikita.

"Well, sure, I suppose that makes sense. But we're asking about why she picked Ayanokouji," answered Sudou.

"Right. Why do you think she did, Sudou-kun?" replied Horikita.

"That's... Well, maybe, for instance, the truth is that Ayanokouji's, like, this super amazing dude or something? So, she decided that he was worth giving praise votes to...or something?"

"Have you seen him do anything incredible, though? My impression is that he's just a student who just so happens to be a fast runner is all."

"Well... I suppose you're right."

"He hasn't gotten especially good grades on the written exams, and aside from being able to run fast, there hasn't been a single time he really stood out in any sporting events. If anything, considering the fact that the rest of his skills aren't up to par with his speed, it's even possible that he's not an all-around good athlete. Additionally, I have to say it doesn't seem like conversational skills are his strong suit, either," said Horikita.

Everything she'd just said was something the others already knew to be true. There was no way they could deny any part of it.

"Which means it's impossible she picked him for that reason," she concluded definitely, without an ounce of hesitation.

"So, what, she just happened to pick him, and that's it? I dunno. For some reason, that just doesn't sound quite right," replied Sudou.

"Think about it. If Ayanokouji-kun were a remarkable person, why would Sakayanagi-san deliberately go out of her way to give him a

Protection Point? There's nothing more foolish than giving a praise vote to an opponent you consider formidable. If there was a single exception to that rule, it would probably be casting a praise vote for Ichinose-san, since she was expected to get the most praise votes all along," said Horikita.

Ichinose had gotten a total of ninety-eight praise votes, the result of the desire to concentrate praise votes on a single person rather than just casting them for someone at random.

"I would certainly never give a Protection Point to a tough opponent."

"Me either."

Kei and Sakura spoke out in agreement, convinced by Horikita's explanation, followed by many of the boys.

"I don't understand why Sakayanagi-san targeted Yamauchi-kun, but if we assume she wanted to get Yamauchi-kun expelled, then we can see everything lines up in a way that makes sense. And so, there was a one-on-one battle between Ayanokouji-kun and Yamauchi-kun in our class, just as she had calculated. Then, by concentrating the majority of praise votes on Ayanokouji-kun, she could ensure that Yamauchi-kun alone would be expelled," reasoned Horikita.

"So...you're saying that Haruki getting expelled was all part of Sakayanagi's strategy?"

"Yes. And it follows that the fact Ayanokouji-kun was chosen—no, that he was used—was mere coincidence. He doesn't stand out and he poses no harm to Class A. That's just how things played out," explained Horikita.

It was a sound theory. And the way she'd explained it to everyone, it couldn't be used against me.

"This is the only reason I can come up with for why Yamauchi-kun was targeted and Ayanokouji-kun was protected," she added.

After hearing that, Sudou and Ike had no choice but to concede. Even so, it seemed like Sudou was having a difficult time coming to grips with it.

"Does the fact I defended him upset you?" asked Horikita, looking at Sudou.

Sudou didn't give her a direct answer, but merely averted his

gaze.

“I defended him because I’m aware of the fact that I’m the main reason why Yamauchi-kun had gotten expelled. Not Ayanokouji-kun,” said Horikita.

She’d been the one to expose Yamauchi’s scheme and back him into a corner.

“If anyone’s at fault, it would be ridiculous to blame anyone but me.”

“But that’s...”

Sudou couldn’t possibly blame Horikita for what happened. He understood the truth. He knew it was inevitable that an unnecessary student would be discarded. Still, no matter how reasonable her explanation, not everyone could accept all this at face value...because the fact remained that I was the one who’d gotten the Protection Point. That meant only one person in this class would be able to watch this test from the sidelines, at a safe distance.

“Would it be okay if I...volunteer to be the commander for this special exam?” I asked, jumping into the conversation after finding the right time to do so.

While I hadn’t heard from Sakayanagi, I was one hundred percent certain that she would be the commander of her class. Which meant we probably couldn’t have a proper showdown unless I was the commander of my class.

“It’s true that everyone feels suspicious of me because of what happened in the In-Class Voting exam. I want to dispel those doubts by offering to sacrifice myself in this test,” I reasoned.

“Ayanokouji...” Sudou looked at me, seeming somewhat shocked.

“Hey, that’s a great idea. This way, no one’ll get expelled, and Ayanokouji can clear everything up!” exclaimed Ike, supporting my bid for commander once he realized it meant we’d get through the exam without any expulsions.

“Hey, wait a minute. Well, I’m happy that Ayanokouji-kun is okay with accepting this position, but I think I’m a little opposed to him being our commander.”

The student who cut in unexpectedly was none other than Shinohara.

“It’s true that if we ask Ayanokouji-kun to do this, then no one will be expelled even if we lose, since he has the Protection Point. But doesn’t that feel like throwing away our chance at winning right off the bat? It’s like, we’re just preparing to lose. I mean, just like Horikita-san said, Ayanokouji-kun is average,” she added.

Basically, she was saying that she couldn’t see us winning this thing if I were the one calling the shots.

“If we get matched up with Class A or Class B, that means we’ll probably be going up against Sakayanagi-san or Ichinose-san, right? The commander seems like an important job, and Ayanokouji-kun doesn’t seem to have much of a chance of winning. You guys know we’ll probably be sent back down to Class D if we lose, right?” said Shinohara.

Some of the students certainly agreed with Shinohara’s opinion.

“Wouldn’t it be better to at least see if anyone else might want to volunteer to be commander?” she concluded.

However, the position came with the risk of expulsion. No one here was foolish enough to raise their hand without a second thought. If things were back to normal, we might have been able to count on Hirata coming forward, but it didn’t seem like that was going to happen. Right now, he simply sat alone, eyes cast downward, not even attempting to join in the discussion.

If there was a single student who wasn’t afraid of expulsion, who would step forward and volunteer to be the commander in this situation...

Everyone turned to look at Horikita. But in a case like this, she likely...

“I am terribly sorry, but I’d like to avoid the risk of expulsion myself, too. If Ayanokouji-kun is willing to step forward for the position, then I’d like to gratefully take him up on that offer. As Shinohara-san said, if we end up fighting against Class A or Class B, then honestly, there’s no definite guarantee that we’ll win at our current level anyway.”

“But Horikita-san, you were just covering for Ayanokouji-kun a second ago. Now you want him to be the commander?” said Kei, cutting into the conversation.

“I simply thought that if I spared him the trouble of having to prove he had nothing to do with Yamauchi-kun’s proposal, then he would be willing to step forward and help by assuming the role of commander in return,” said Horikita.

She’d managed to cleverly cut off any chances I had of weaseling out of the role. It seemed Horikita had wanted all along to foist the role of commander on me, just as I’d thought she might. She thought much more highly of my abilities than the other students did, and she was probably convinced it would be better to leave the position of commander to me than to some other half-hearted student. Besides, even if we lost, I could always just use my Protection Point.

“Is anyone else willing to step forward?” asked Horikita.

If there was any room for rebuttal, it would be from someone willing to volunteer for the position of commander. However, there didn’t appear to be anyone willing to take the risk of getting expelled.

“Even though the position is called commander, we can make careful preparations for everything ahead of time, just in case. As long as the commander follows those directions on the day of the exam and keeps everyone in line, it shouldn’t really make much of a difference who is in the role,” said Horikita.

The students who weren’t thinking too deeply about the matter seemed convinced, letting out sounds of agreement.

“In any case, class is about to begin. The school isn’t going to set aside time for us to discuss this, so we should make plans to meet up,” she added.

Now that Hirata wasn’t taking the initiative, it looked as though Horikita was the one to step forward and lead the class.

Chapter 4: Opponents

ALMOST EVERY STUDENT in Class C had decided to meet up in the classroom during our lunch break that same day. The students who didn't bring their own lunches to school were expected to head to the store to get one and then come right back to meet up with everyone in the classroom. I was one of those students, so I left the classroom right away, made my way to a location with no one else around, and messaged two specific people from my contacts.

I was able to connect with the first person immediately, since I'd sent them a message on my phone ahead of time. That left the other person.

Once I was done taking care of business, I finished my shopping and returned to the classroom. There were two students who hadn't returned. One of them was Kouenji Rokusuke, a man who couldn't be tied down by anyone. The other was Hirata Yousuke. Those two aside, there were thirty-seven students gathered here.

"It seems like Hirata-kun isn't participating after all."

"Looks that way."

Although some people sounded worried, the clock was ticking. The more time we could spend jointly discussing the events, the better.

"Pfft, 'turn over a new leaf' he says! In the end, that dude ain't takin' this seriously at all!" huffed Sudou.

I could understand why he'd raise his voice in anger. Alternatively, I was sure some students had thought Kouenji might have started taking things seriously, at least on the surface. Reality wasn't so kind—or rather, I supposed, people didn't change that easily. Kouenji would probably continue to wiggle out of things, slippery as ever, getting by on vague, half-hearted words.

But I couldn't imagine such an approach would work forever. Sooner or later, there would probably be another exam like the In-Class Voting test. When that time came, Kouenji would have to pay the price.

"Let's just forget 'im and get this show on the road already, shit."

“He’s not worth getting all riled up over. Now then, I’ve gone ahead and made copies of the manual explaining the events that was provided to us. I’ll distribute those copies to all of you. Read it carefully as you eat your lunch. I was intending for us to discuss the specifics in detail after class,” said Horikita.

Now that there was no one else to take charge, Horikita had no choice but to step in and lead the way.

“If there’s something you don’t understand, please feel free to come to me with your questions at any time, even while I’m eating.”

It seemed she’d already thoroughly perused the manual and had no lingering questions, herself.

4.1

CLASSES HAD ENDED without incident that day. Afterward, Chabashira had told us to send whoever we'd decided would be commander out into the hallway, and stepped out of the classroom. Hirata immediately got up from his seat after she left. One of the girls in class, Nishimura, hurriedly tried to call out to him.

"Um... Well, about the events, we thought we'd discuss—" she began, trailing off once she saw that Hirata just quietly walked right out of the classroom, her words failing to reach him.

"Hirata-kun..."

Nishimura and the others could plainly see the intense, brooding aura of depression surrounding Hirata. The only exception was Kouenji, who remained nonchalantly looking down at his phone, as if completely unaware of this series of disturbances.

"I... I'm going to use the restroom. I'll be right back," said Wang Mei-Yu, whom everyone called Mii-chan, rising from her seat.

So she said, but she was probably going to chase after Hirata.

"Well, seeing as how he's not being of any use, I suppose I have no choice but to step up and do it myself," said Horikita, taking the initiative and preparing to head up to the podium.

"Sorry, but I'll leave the discussion part to you. I have commander stuff to take care of," I told her.

"That's fine. I suppose we'll find out who we're going up against once you get to the multi-purpose room. If you have a choice, choose Class D," said Horikita.

"I understand. But don't expect too much from me," I replied, standing up.

Since I was the person who'd taken on the role of commander, I exited the classroom and stepped out into the hallway.

"Oh, it's you, Ayanokouji. Who on earth did you guys pick as your commander?" asked Chabashira, letting out an exasperated sigh as she looked in the direction that Mii-chan and Hirata had disappeared.

"Me. I'm the commander," I answered.

“...Oh?”

Chabashira and I made our way to the special building together.

“We have to go all the way over to the special building just to pick out which classes are facing each other?” I asked.

“You’ll also be receiving an explanation as to how things work on the day of the exam,” said Chabashira.

There was hardly anyone in the special building, so my ears picked up the sound of our footsteps much easier.

“You went through such an ordeal to get a Protection Point, only to be forced into being the commander. That’s rough.”

“I wasn’t forced into it. I volunteered willingly,” I replied.

Chabashira stopped walking. “...You did?”

“Is something wrong with that?”

“I thought you hated attracting attention?” she asked.

“It all came down to whether or not I’d passively accept the role.”

“I see. So, one way or another, you were put in a situation where you couldn’t say no.”

Ultimately, it was much easier for the student who had the Protection Point to become the commander. If that student refused to be the commander, it meant only one person would be safe. The only difference in this situation was whether you let yourself be pushed off that cliff, or took the plunge and jumped on your own initiative.

“But no matter how you wound up in the role, being the commander brings with it a great deal of responsibility. If you cut any corners, it’ll spell defeat for Class C,” said Chabashira.

Since there was no else around, she spoke more forcefully.

“Was that a threat?” I asked.

As I turned to look at her, she gave me a slight smile.

“You can interpret what I said however you like. But I am looking forward to it, Ayanokouji. Now I can finally see what you’re capable of.”

Chabashira had her heart set on reaching Class A. That part of her seemed to be expecting a lot of me.

“There’s no guarantee I’ll win.”

“You think so? Sorry, but I for one can’t possibly imagine you losing,” she told me.

After that, we were mostly silent as we made our way to the special building.

4.2

THE MULTI-PURPOSE ROOM was located in the special building.

Apparently, it was going to be something of a central hub for this exam.

“The other three students have already arrived,” said Chabashira.

The door to the multi-purpose room opened, and I immediately caught sight of the teachers and students representing the other classes. I saw Sakayanagi from Class A, Ichinose from Class B, and Kaneda from Class D. As you might expect, they were all students who had Protection Points. Then I saw two computers, stationed facing each other, each connected to a large monitor.

“Well, now that we have the commanders from each class all gathered together, we’d like to determine which classes will be facing off against each other. We’re going to have you each draw one slip of paper from this box. The student who draws the slip of paper with the red circle on it will be given the right to choose their opponent,” said Mashima-sensei, presenting us with the box with the raffle slips in them.

He urged Class A to draw first, but Sakayanagi refused.

“They say good things come to those who wait. I don’t mind going last. You may go ahead, Ichinose-san,” said Sakayanagi.

“Well then, don’t mind if I do,” said Ichinose, drawing a slip of paper.

After her came Class C, followed by Class D. Since the slips of paper weren’t folded up, we understood the results almost immediately after drawing. Kaneda from Class D was the one who drew the slip with the red mark. Which meant that Class D had won the right to choose their opponent.

“It would seem there’s no need for me to check what’s on the last slip of paper then, is there, Mashima-sensei?” said Sakayanagi.

Mashima-sensei drew the remaining slip of paper from the box himself. Naturally, it didn’t have a red circle on it.

“It seems good things didn’t come to those who waited, after all,” he told her.

“I’m not so sure about that. It’s not necessarily good luck to be the one to draw it,” said Sakayanagi.

“I wonder if that means Class A can really afford to take it easy, no matter who they go up against?” said Ichinose.

“Oh no, that’s not it at all. If possible, I’d like to avoid facing your class, Ichinose-san,” replied Sakayanagi. It was hard to tell whether she was just being polite or genuinely meant it.

“Please tell us which class you’ll be choosing,” said Mashima-sensei, urging Kaneda to answer.

Kaneda responded with a subtle nod. Class D had probably held their own discussions in the morning and after class, deciding which class they’d have the best chance of winning against.

“Then I’ll come right out and say it. Class D wishes...to go up against Class B,” announced Kaneda, making a declaration of war on an unexpected opponent.

“You’re sure you want to choose Class B?” asked Mashima-sensei, seeking confirmation of Kaneda’s decision.

“Yes,” he replied firmly.

After making sure, Mashima-sensei finalized the match-ups. If Class D was going up against Class B, it naturally followed that Class A would be going up against Class C.

“I’d thought for certain you’d go for Class C, but you chose Class B. Why?” asked Sakayanagi, pressing Kaneda for the reason behind his decision.

“If we’re to turn our situation around, we’ll need to take as many points as we can away from the higher-level classes. That being said, we’d like to avoid fighting Class A right now,” said Kaneda.

So, having deemed Class A to be an understandably difficult opponent, they opted for Class B.

“I see. Well, as far as I’m concerned, this means that you’ve saved me the trouble of facing the powerful foe that is Class B, and for that, I’m grateful. I wish you in Class D the best of luck in your efforts,” said Sakayanagi.

She gave Kaneda a slight bow of gratitude, but I couldn’t help but be aware of a bit of trickery involved in getting us to this point. Of

course, the fact that Kaneda had won the right to choose was entirely coincidental, but the results would've been the same no matter who drew the winning slip. I had contacted Ichinose and Ishizaki ahead of time, before classes had ended for the day, telling them I wanted them to back off and let me handle Class A.

Ichinose seemed to genuinely want to go up against Class A herself, but she'd agreed to let me handle it, as a way of paying me back. And apparently, Ishizaki and the rest of Class D had already planned to pick Class B anyway, so that was fine. All for the sake of arranging a confrontation with Sakayanagi and Class A.

The only problem would've been if I had been the one who won the lottery. Horikita had specifically told me to choose Class D, so I would've had to come up with an excuse if that happened. A one-in-four chance wasn't worth worrying about, though. Basically, this entire lottery had been fixed.

Besides, I was sure Sakayanagi knew I'd been laying the groundwork for this outcome. And so, all the match-ups had been determined ahead of time.

"Now then, I'll explain the system you'll be using on the day of the special exam. During the exam, you'll be in the multi-purpose room, using a computer like the two that you see set up here. You will be fulfilling your role as commander here, assigning which student will be in which event, all in real time," explained Mashima-sensei.

The left-hand computer's screen was projected on the large monitor. While Chabashira operated the computer, Mashima-sensei continued explaining.

"This is a list of students in Class A. Using the mouse, you'll drag and drop the selected student's profile picture onto the box for a specific event. If you make a mistake or if you wish to reconsider your choice partway through, you can use the mouse to drag the student's profile picture outside of the box, and then re-select. Or use your finger to operate it via the touchscreen," said Mashima-sensei.

"It's kind of like a video game, isn't it?"

"It really is!"

Ichinose and Hoshinomiya-sensei were engaged in their own fun conversation.

“There is a time limit on the student selection for each event, represented by the number you currently see counting down on the screen. The more participants required for an event, the more time you’ll be given to choose. You can expect about 30 seconds per person,” he added.

Which meant we’d have three hundred seconds for a ten-person event.

“Please note that if you don’t make your selections within the time limit, the remaining spaces will be filled with students chosen at random. Moreover, if you end up selecting too many students for an event, excess participants will be discarded via random selection, as well.”

So basically, those limits were iron-clad.

“Once the games begin, the action will be shown on the large monitor in real-time.”

A sample video of a shogi match began to play on the monitor.

“Information describing how the commander can participate in the match will be displayed on your personal monitor once the match begins.”

The image on the large monitor switched back to displaying what was on the left computer screen. The words “*The commander can pause the game and redo a move once*” were displayed on the screen, probably an example of how the commander could get involved in a particular event, just as Mashima-sensei had just explained.

“Please keep in mind that you can confirm the details of these rules and activate them by clicking them.”

The large monitor went back to showing the shogi match.

“Also, instructions from the commanders to their teammates are relayed not via phone calls, but as texts, which are automatically read aloud via a text-to-speech system. All you have to do is type out the words and press enter, and the message will be played through the participant’s headset.”

So our messages would automatically be read aloud by a machine, huh? Probably to keep us from spreading misinformation or revealing more than what was allowed. Using the shogi game currently on the screen as an example, though the rule stated that the commander could

only get involved by pausing the game and redoing a move once, clever wording would make it possible for the commander to basically give the participant instructions for two or three moves.

“If the commander deviates from the established rules and involves themselves more than what is allowed, the school may disqualify them for breaking the rules.”

I supposed that made sense. It was safe to assume every message the commanders sent out was being reviewed by a third party.

“Only one participant will be wearing a headset per event. Even in a team event, that means only one person will be able to receive instructions. The commander will also specify which participant will wear the headset.”

It seemed I had my work cut out for me. There were things we could decide beforehand, but we still needed to prepare for the unexpected.

“The commander can issue instructions whenever they wish, so long as it is in accordance with the rules.”

We could freely change the display on our own screen, including switching displays, maximizing or minimizing windows, and so on. There were more than a few things we could keep an eye on, from observing the students participating in the current event to preparing for the next event.

“Thus concludes my explanation of the duties of the commander and the systems at play. Are there any questions?”

Mashima-sensei looked around, but it seemed no one had any questions.

“That will be all for today, then. In the event you wish to review the operating system, you may return to the multi-purpose room, accompanied by a teacher, up to one week before the exam. That is all.”

And so, having heard how the commander position would work, we dispersed.

4.3

I HEADED BACK to my dorm room, texted Horikita to tell her which class we were up against, then immediately started thinking about my duties as commander. Come to think of it, this was my first time tackling one of this school's exams head-on. To be completely honest, I didn't really think I could lose a one-on-one fight. But in this exam, I'd be waging war by commanding the entire class.

I could only fight while staying within the limits of my class's abilities. Even an unparalleled strategist like Sun Tzu wouldn't stand a chance of winning if he led an army of children against an army of full-grown adults. Though the commanders' ability to get involved in the events was key, there were some fundamental things I needed to know before we went into this fight.

One of those things was an understanding of Class C's current potential. Who did they like and dislike? What were they good at and what did they struggle with? I couldn't find the path to victory unless I understood how to group my classmates together. And when it came to information-gathering and leadership skills, I was probably in the very bottom tier of the class. I didn't even know what Shinohara and Onodera liked to eat.

So what should I do first?

The answer was obvious. I needed to talk to someone who knew the class well. It was a simple approach, for sure, but entirely unavoidable. There were probably three people who I could count on in this situation: Kei, Hirata, and Kushida.

Ideally, I'd be able to consult all three of them. However, given the current situation, the only one who would definitely help me was Kei.

Hirata was broken beyond recovery right now, and Kushida had been deeply wounded by the in-class voting. Though she wasn't showing it on the surface at all, I was sure she was incredibly angry with Horikita. I had no idea just how skeptical Kushida was of me right now, but I thought it safe to assume she was warier of me than before.

Just before six o'clock in the evening, as the sun was beginning to

set and give way to dusk, my doorbell rang. A single visitor had come to my room. I didn't hesitate to open the door and invite them inside.

"...Sup."

The visitor...was none other than Karuizawa Kei, still clad in her school uniform.

"Were you in the school building all this time?" I asked.

"Unlike you, I have lots of friends. And besides, I'm kind of a big deal today," replied Kei, phrasing her response bizarrely.

She turned to look at me.

"You're a big deal? Why?" I asked in return.

Kei, seeing that I didn't understand what was going on, averted her eyes in apparent anger.

"...Whatever. It doesn't matter. More importantly, it's pretty unusual for you to call me over at this hour. Also, are you sure you're okay being so casual about this? Didn't you say it'd be trouble if we were seen by someone?" she said, looking uncomfortably around my room.

"It's fine. After everything that's happened, the need for us to be careful has diminished considerably."

"You're talking about what happened with Hashimoto-kun from Class A, right? And that upperclassman who saw us together?"

"Something like that."

"So our relationship is slowly going to gradually become public knowledge. Kiyotaka... That's not a problem?" she asked.

"Not a problem at all."

My immediate answer seemed to put Kei at ease, since she let out a sigh of relief.

"I suppose it's fine, then."

It was certainly true that there were some things I could only do if no one knew about my connection with Kei. But the situation was beginning to change, little by little. Besides, it was easier for me to have Kei move in the open, rather than behind the scenes, like a spy.

"But...I mean, we're a guy and girl from the same class, right? If someone saw me coming here, there'll be weird rumors about the two

of us being alone together,” said Kei.

Was she the type of person to worry about that kind of thing?

“I took on the role of commander for this exam. And Kei, you’re one of the most influential people in our class. The two of us meeting up shouldn’t strike anyone as too unnatural,” I replied, figuring I’d try to put her at ease.

“Hm. Well, I guess so.”

It seemed something about this was still bothering her.

“You know, come to think of it, why did you take on the role of commander, anyway? I mean, you’re not really the type of guy to feel obligated to do something because he has a Protection Point or whatever.”

As expected, she did understand me to a certain extent.

“Putting my personal feelings aside, I have to consider the way my classmates perceive me. Besides, Yamauchi just got expelled, and everyone in class is on high alert right now. This was the best option available.”

“That’s it?” she asked.

“That’s it.”

“If it were me, I wouldn’t have become the commander, no matter what anyone said,” said Kei.

Which was something she could do precisely because of the reputation she’d established for herself in class. Even if she were to stubbornly say that the Protection Point was hers and hers alone, no one would really criticize her for it. Honestly, it was pretty brilliant.

“Putting all that aside, tell me about what’s going on in the class,” I told her.

“What’s going on, huh? Honestly, I have no idea where to even begin. And just so you know, it’s not like I know everything, okay? Especially when it comes to the boys. I haven’t got a clue what’s going on with them.”

“That’s not really a problem. I’d like to talk with Kushida and Hirata individually later, if it’s possible,” I told her.

That was just what I was hoping for, though. My ideal scenario. I had absolutely no idea if I’d actually be able to talk to them.

“Well, yeah, I suppose talking to those two would get you all the details of what’s going on in our class, but...” said Kei, pausing briefly.

She crossed her arms, looking conflicted, and spoke up once more.

“Kushida-san aside, don’t you think talking to Yousuke-kun might be impossible right now? He just seems so totally defeated.”

“Are you worried about him, too?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, no one in Class C likes seeing Yousuke-kun this way.”

It was certainly true that Class C was short a major asset without Hirata, and we suffered for it. With no one stepping up to fulfill the role of mediator, our class was lacking a sense of stability.

“In any case, I’ll start with what you can tell me.”

“Um, it’s kinda hard for me to just do all the talking, though. How about you ask me questions and we go back and forth?”

If that was what she wanted, then I’d ask about each of the girls in Class C, one by one. We went down the list and I committed all their profiles to memory.

“...**A**ND THAT’S ABOUT IT, I think.”

Less than ten minutes later, I’d gotten all the information I needed from Kei.

“Hey, uh, shouldn’t you be writing this down or something? You know I’m not going over all of that again even if you ask me to, right?” said Kei.

“No problem.”

“So, wait, you’re saying that you memorized everything?”

“For the most part.”

“Oh, I *see*. Wow. You’re so amazing. Absolutely amazing.” The praise didn’t sound sincere. “Anyway, our opponent’s Class A, right? Won’t this be a really tough match-up for you?”

“I’m not the one on the frontlines. You and the rest of our classmates will be handling that. Just because I can

step in as commander doesn’t necessarily mean I have the power to turn the tides. If anything, I should be asking if *you’re* going to be okay. Will you be?”

“M-me? I, uh...”

Kei tried to say something, but the words didn’t seem to come.

“...Can you make it so I don’t have to take a turn?” she asked.

“That’s not a decision I can make on my own. Depending on our opponent’s strategy, there’s a possibility that everyone will have to participate twice.”

“No, no, there’s just no way I could do that! I’m not good at studying *or* sports!” shouted Kei, frantically shaking her head to emphasize how little she wanted to participate. “Besides, I’m sure that you of all people can beat Sakayanagi-san, Kiyotaka!” she added, giving me a thumbs-up.

She probably just wanted to participate as little as possible, thereby avoiding any responsibility. However, the truth was that even Kei didn’t grasp the full extent of who I was.

"I mean, doesn't it help that no one's expecting you to win?" she reasoned.

"Yeah, I suppose so." It was true that having everyone assume you were going to lose made some things easier.

"So, um, is that everything you wanted to say? You said we had to talk in person for this? If that was it, why didn't you just call?"

"Some things are easier to understand when discussed in person."

Perhaps that wasn't the answer she'd been expecting, because Kei's expression remained stiff.

"Hmph... So we're done talking right? Then, I'll...be heading back, okay?" said Kei, getting ready to leave.

She seemed to think that was it—that the conversation wasn't going anywhere else. We'd covered the bare minimum of what we needed to discuss, and she prepared to head back to her own dorm.

"I'll contact you again if there's anything else I need."

"...Yeah, yeah."

From the look on her face, she'd been expecting something to happen, but had now given up on it. But apparently, she was planning to stay stubborn to the very end, because she wasn't saying anything. It would've made it a whole lot easier for both of us if she just came out with it herself, but...

"Wait a second. There's still something I wanted to talk to you about," I told her.

I got up, and went over to my drawers, where I kept something hidden so no one would see it if they happened to come into my room.

"What...? If you had something to say, then you should've come out and said it earlier," said Kei.

"It's your birthday today, isn't it?" I asked.

"Huh... Wait, you knew...?" she asked in return.

I took the item out from the drawer. I'd ordered it from the school store and had it delivered. I'd even had it wrapped, since it was for someone's birthday.

"I was just teasing you a little."

"H-heh, don't try anything funny with me. If you had a present,

you should have just handed it over right away. But I gotta tell you, I got lots of good stuff from other friends, so your gift has a lot to measure up to,” she told me.

Kei extended her hands to receive the gift as she spoke, though she turned her face to the side so she wasn’t looking me in the eye. When I saw her do that, I promptly stopped myself from handing it over.

“Were you looking forward to this?” I teased.

“N-n-not really?”

“Oh. Well, if you don’t really care, then I suppose I don’t have to give it to you.”

“H-huh?! You can’t just decide not to give a gift at the last second after you’ve already decided you’re giving one!”

That made no sense at all.

“Well, this is also your White Day gift. You know, as payback for Valentine’s Day. On top of being a birthday gift,” I told her.

“And there it is... So, you’re the kind of guy who just combines things because it’s too much of a hassle to do them separately, huh?” said Kei, letting out an exasperated sigh as she took the gift from me. She looked puzzled by how small and light it was. “Is there even anything in this?”

“I’m not brave enough to give you an empty box,” I teased.

I mean, it was obvious she’d be upset if I did something like that.

“Then it’s okay if I make sure, hm?” she replied, sounding like a police officer questioning a suspect.

She carefully peeled off the wrapping paper, and then removed the box’s lid to examine its contents. What peeked out of the opened box was something metallic that shone gold.

“Wha... what is this?!” she shouted, surprised.

Even though she sounded shocked, it should’ve been clear to anyone what she was looking at.

“It’s a necklace.”

“I-I can see that! But this is a super extravagant gift!”

“Extravagant?”

“I-I mean, a necklace isn’t the kind of thing that you’d consider as a gift between friends!”

So she said, but...

I tilted my head to the side, expressing my confusion. I didn’t quite get what Kei was saying. But rather than explain what she meant, it seemed she still had something else she wanted to say.

“And, on top of that, you know what else? It doesn’t even seem like it suits me! I mean, it’s heart-shaped!”

She was probably referring to the pendant part of the necklace being shaped like a heart. Apparently, my birthday present to her wasn’t a very good one.

“It’s heart-shaped!”

She must have particularly disliked that part, since she repeated it for emphasis. She was breathing heavily now. Her face was completely red. Even I felt a little stung after she protested so harshly. No matter who they’re for, gifts are given to make people happy.

“Wasn’t this really expensive?” she asked.

“It wasn’t cheap. About twenty thousand or so.”

“Tw—why did you go out of your way to get me such an expensive necklace...?” she asked.

“What do you mean, why...?” I asked.

Kei’s face grew even redder as she looked at me. It seemed like answering her honestly would probably be best.



“To be honest, I’ve never given a girl a birthday present before. I thought I’d do some research on the internet first, to try to gather information. Then I saw a major online retailer, *Rakkan Ichiba*, had a necklace that was recommended as the number one birthday present for girls. They also said that it was a big hit with high school girls,” I replied.

I also remembered it being touted as the perfect best return gift, whether it was for someone you were romantically involved with or not. I’d decided that if I was going to combine her birthday gift and her White Day gift into one, I needed to spend a fair amount of money on it, too.

“Whoa...”

For some reason, Kei was looking at me like I was nuts. I was beginning to think I’d messed this up.

“You know, even though you’re smart, you’re also kinda dumb about some things. It’s like you don’t know much about the world. A gift like this might be a big hit with high school girls, sure, but it’s something girls would want to pick out for themselves, to make sure it suits their style and tastes. I guess it’s a relief you didn’t pick out a ring or something, which would’ve meant matching my ring size... But to be blunt, this gets a rating of like ten points out of a hundred, okay?” said Kei.

Even though I’d bought an expensive gift, it would seem that in the end, I’d failed miserably. She explained to me what high school girls were like, leaving me with more than a few things to reflect on. It was a well-intentioned gift, but I wasn’t so sure I’d really selected it with Kei’s feelings in mind.

“Well, what if I had gotten you a box of sweets?” I asked.

“That’d probably bump your score up to fifteen points.”

Wow. To think a box of sweets would score higher than a twenty-thousand-yen necklace...

“I probably can’t return it now that it’s been opened, but if you don’t need it, you can just leave it here before you go. If you’re okay with getting a box of sweets instead, I can get that for you in a few days,” I suggested, lamenting my lack of research and understanding.

After all, a fifteen-point gift would probably make Kei happier

than a ten-point one. Or so I thought, but...

“.....”

Kei looked at the necklace for a while and then looked back at me. Then, just when I thought she was going to put it away, she put it around her neck instead. She told me that she was going to use my mirror for a minute, and went over to check out how the necklace looked on her.

“Hm. Well, the heart pendant part is a little childish, just like I thought it’d be. But I’m pretty hot, so I can make anything look good,” said Kei.

While I couldn’t help but wonder what in the world this first-year student was talking about, she sounded completely serious. After examining how the necklace looked on her from every angle, she gave herself a self-satisfied nod. I’d thought she was just trying it on, and would return it to me afterward, but she carefully put the necklace back in its box and then put that box in her bag.

“Well, this was like your first time giving a girl a gift, right? I’ll accept it, just this once.”

“...That’s fine with me.”

It wasn’t like I would be able to give it to anyone else if she handed it back to me, I supposed.

Chapter 5: What the Class is Lacking

WE PLANNED to have another discussion session the day after the match-ups were decided. It would be held after class, just like yesterday, leaving us free during lunch. I gathered with the Ayanokouji Group in the classroom, as usual, and we headed toward the cafeteria.

“How did yesterday’s discussion go?” I decided to ask my friends about what happened yesterday without hesitation.

Meeting up with the other commanders, deciding the class match-ups, and hearing the commander’s role explained in full had taken about an hour. By the time I returned to class, the students were already on their way back to the dorms.

“You didn’t hear from Horikita-san...? Well, I suppose that’s understandable,” said Airi vaguely, her choice of words hard to follow. After a brief moment, she spoke up once more. “Well, you know how there’s an event manual, right? We all wound up really struggling to comprehend the rules...”

“We didn’t even have a real discussion. It was a complete waste of time,” said Keisei, letting out an exasperated sigh.

Apparently, reading the rules over lunch break hadn’t been long enough for everyone to really grasp them. It sounded like the discussion the other day had ended with people finally understanding the rules, and nothing more. I suppose you could say that was typical of Class C.

“Besides, the problem wasn’t just with our class,” added Keisei.

“What do you mean by that, Yukimuu?” asked Haruka.

“There’s a limited number of places on campus where a large crowd of students can gather, right?” said Keisei.

“Well, yeah, I guess it’s pretty much impossible for forty people to meet up in a karaoke room or on the benches at the mall or something. What about it?”

“I was the first person to leave the classroom after our discussion had ended yesterday, and... Well, there were some students from Class A out there. Standing out in the hallway outside Class C.”

Haruka and Airi exchanged puzzled looks, as if saying, “What’s the big deal with that?” Akito didn’t seem to understand at first, either, but he picked up on what Keisei was saying after giving it a little thought.

“...So, you’re saying they were spying on us or something?” asked Akito.

“Exactly. The decisions we make as a class for this exam are going to be spoken out loud *in class*, right? Even if they just happen to listen in on our discussions, they’ll pick up a certain amount of information,” said Keisei.

Information such as what events we were going to choose or who was good at what, for instance. There was no doubt that getting your hands on such information would prove advantageous, even if you only got a little of it. Which meant that the battle had already begun.

“If you look at the situation from that perspective, that means Class C is already lagging.”

“Scary! Sakayanagi-san has already made her move!” Haruka rubbed her arms, shaking nervously. But he bounced back quickly and suggested we pay Class A back in kind. “Well then, wouldn’t it be a good idea for us to go get information on Class A? You know, like that one dude said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth or whatever.”

However, Keisei wasn’t about to agree to that.

“If it were that easy, then we wouldn’t be worrying about it in the first place,” said Keisei.

“Huh?”

“I’m probably not the only one who thinks so, either. I’m sure Horikita and some of the others know it’d be pointless for us to try doing that, too. Do you really think that all forty members of Class A are going to gather and discuss this together?” asked Keisei.

Class C lacked unity, so the first thing we needed to do was get everyone in one place. This was not at all the case for Class A, where Sakayanagi and a number of other top students decided the entire class’s course of action. Who would be the commander? Who would come up with events? Who would gather information? Class A had already decided who would fill these roles the moment the exam began. Even if they did hold a discussion in the classroom, like Class C had

done, they'd probably have two or three people stand watch outside to keep anyone from conducting reconnaissance.

"But shouldn't we at least *try* to probe for info? I mean, they might let their guard down. Maybe they'll end up having an unplanned gathering in their classroom and discuss something openly?"

"If they did actually do that, I'd be terrified. I would doubt the authenticity of any information coming from a meeting like that," said Keisei.

If the information we picked up from listening in on such a meeting turned out to be fake, we'd just be wasting our time. Keisei was right on the money. Information would be concealed, and we should be doubtful of any information that wasn't.

"I suppose engaging in this kind of information warfare is necessary. The crucial part is how we do it..." he added.

"Can we... even win?" squeaked an anxious Airi, probably already feeling like the walls were closing in around us.

"As of this moment, it'd probably be a good idea for us to assume they're one or two steps ahead."

Well, since Class C hadn't decided on anything yet, we weren't exactly leading the way.

"Still, I never imagined that we'd be going up against Class A," said Haruka.

"Sorry. It's my fault for losing the drawing," I replied.

In reality, I would've chosen Class A myself even if I'd won the lottery, but I figured I should at least appear apologetic.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean it like that! Sorry, sorry! I wasn't blaming you at all or anything, Kiyopon!" said Haruka. She must have taken my apology more seriously than I had imagined, because she sounded really flustered.

"Wow, that's pretty harsh, Haruka. Expecting him to draw the winner when there was only a one-in-four chance," said Akito, causing Haruka to shrink back even more.

"I-I already said that's not what I meant though, jeez..." she huffed.

She got lost in thought for a few moments before speaking up

again, probably wanting to change the topic.

“I hope they go a little easy on us. I mean, they’re only going up against Class C, after all. You think so too, right, Miyachi?” said Haruka.

“Go easy on us...? Do you honestly think Sakayanagi is the type?”

“...No, not at all. She didn’t just totally crush Yamauchi-kun, she tortured everyone in Class C,” said Haruka, looking up at the ceiling, completely disheartened.

“I have to say, there’s just no end to your troubles, huh, Kiyotaka? I mean, with being the commander and all,” said Keisei, patting me on the shoulder to show appreciation for everything I was going through.

“I suppose I do have a Protection Point, though. I didn’t really have any choice but to step up and be the commander. I don’t want us to lose, but I am pretty grateful we don’t have to worry about anyone getting expelled,” I replied.

That was all I could say to my friends right now. Whatever the reason, the fact remained that I was the one selfishly leading us into a confrontation with Class A.

“We’re going up against Class A. Even if we lose, it’s not like anyone can really blame you for it, Kiyotaka.”

“And Sakayanagi-san is their commander.”

Looking at our odds, ninety-nine out of a hundred people would say Sakayanagi would be the one to win this. Even so, it wasn’t like losing would change my standing within the class. In fact, even if I *did* win, I’d only be ensuring credit went to Horikita’s leadership and her meticulous strategizing.

“Well... winning is probably going to be difficult,” said Keisei, crossing his arms and letting out a defeated sigh.

Akito said something unexpected, then. “It’s not like we’re guaranteed to lose just because we’re up against Class A.”

“You...think so? Well, it’s not like I really want us to lose or anything, but...” said Haruka.

“This isn’t some kind of secret conspiracy. There’s gotta be a way to wrestle victory from Class A, right?” said Akito, pausing briefly before continuing to explain. “When the exam was announced, I thought it was ridiculous to fight against the higher-level classes too.

But something that blabbermouth Ike said made me think we might have a chance to win this thing.”

“Something Ike said? Wait, are you talking about when he brought up Rock Paper Scissors?” replied Haruka, thinking back to what had happened in class.

Akito nodded in response.

“At first, I thought it was a stupid idea for an event. But then I realized that if we go with events that depend on luck, we always have a fifty percent chance of winning, no matter who we’re up against. It could be Old Maid or Daifugō, or whatever. I started to think that going with five events on the day of the exam where luck plays a big factor wouldn’t be such a bad idea,” said Akito.

After hearing Akito’s explanation, Haruka’s eyes lit up. “And with a plan like that, we could fight on even footing with anyone, even Class B or Class A!”

“That’s right! I don’t think that’s a bad idea at all!” said Airi.

“Well...it’s not that simple, actually.”

While Airi, Haruka, and Akito rejoiced at the idea, Keisei stepped back and looked at it calmly.

“I won’t know the precise figures until I run some calculations, but with a strategy like that, our chances of winning would probably only be somewhere between five or ten percent,” he reasoned.

“Huh? That’s it? I mean, I’m not saying we’d have exactly a fifty percent chance of winning, but shouldn’t it be at least twenty or thirty percent? I mean, would getting five events chosen and winning four of them really be all that hard?” asked Haruka.

“We’d need to be *quite* lucky for things to work out that way,” replied Keisei.

We’d have to gamble on the possibility that five of the seven events we’d be competing in would be the ones proposed by Class C, not to mention being lucky enough to win four or more of those events. If we assumed we had a fifty percent chance of winning each individual event, and used that assumption as a baseline to calculate the probability of winning overall, then...

I calculated the probability in my head.

The chances that the seven final events would include a full five events chosen by our class was 8.33 percent. And if our chances of winning each event was fifty percent, then our chances of winning four or more events overall would be 18.75 percent. If we wanted to fulfill both those conditions, then the end result was that we'd have a 1.56 percent chance of pulling everything off.

So, it was actually a far cry from five percent. It was hard to call relying solely on luck a good plan. That being said, this was just me examining simple hypotheticals, calculating our chances of winning four or more games based solely on luck. In reality, those chances would fluctuate due to a variety of contributing factors. Still, there was no doubt you could hardly call it a strategy.

With that in mind, we should choose events in fields that we excelled, even if that meant taking on the risk of losing. The fewer events where we had to rely on a fifty-fifty chance solely based on luck, the better.

"So, it's a no-go, huh? I guess I just thought that *maybe* it could work is all." Akito scratched his cheek, having realized how overly optimistic his idea was.

Suddenly, I noticed Airi's eyes on me. She wore a look of concern, and when I made eye contact with her, she looked even more worried.

"Kiyotaka-kun... Um, are you all right? I mean, being commander, and—"

It seemed the difficulty of us winning against Class A was weighing on her mind, just as it was becoming clearer for everyone to see.

"Yeah, Kiyopon. You really don't need to force yourself into this just because you have a Protection Point," said Haruka, cutting in as if she was finishing Airi's thought for her.

"Haruka's right. At the very least, we never really imagined that you had any connection with Sakayanagi or anything. Right?" said Akito.

Everyone nodded in response to that. Having people trust you certainly didn't feel bad at all.

"I guess it does seem like there are some people in class that suspect you, but I think most everyone's pretty convinced, thanks to

Horikita-san's explanation. Come to think of it—I thought Protection Points were amazing at first, but now it kind of feels like they're annoying to have, huh?"

"I was pretty jealous of everyone who got a Protection Point, before. But looking at what's happening with Kiyotaka-kun now, if I had one, I feel like I'd probably just end up using it right away if I was in his situation."

The truth was that only one person was safe. Everyone else was out there in the wilds. It wouldn't be easy to continue maintaining your own safety without getting invested.

In contrast to the timid Airi, Keisei crossed his arms and took a different stance. "If I had a Protection Point, I wouldn't use it at all, no matter what anyone else said."

"Even if that resulted in animosity, jealousy, or resentment from your classmates, though?"

"No, no, you're not getting it. I wouldn't allow something like that to bother me, especially for something that I won on my own merits. In fact, Kiyotaka should keep his at all costs, in order to protect himself," said Keisei, crossing his arms defiantly, almost as if he were the one being sacrificed.

Akito, who'd been silent so far, looked at me. "Fact is, fighting Class A is gonna be really tough, so we should probably be grateful Kiyotaka took on the job. If it had been someone else, we might have seen expulsion number two, right? Or are you saying you could've volunteered to be the commander, Keisei?"

"Well... No, I suppose you've got a point."

It wasn't like I didn't understand Keisei's frustrations. He was probably trying to point out that putting a more capable student in the position of commander would give us a better chance at winning.

"I suppose it's true we have to deal with the unpleasantness of potential expulsion in this exam, too. But if that wasn't an issue, I wonder who would have been the best candidate for commander? Maybe Horikita-san, after all?" said Airi, cocking her head to the side. She seemed to be thinking of several candidates.

"Yeah, that sounds like the right pick to me. Or maybe someone like Hirata-kun or Kushida-san? Yukimuu would have been a pretty

good pick, too,” said Haruka, rattling off the names of students who’d probably produce solid results as commander.

“Hirata, huh... I have to wonder what his deal is,” said Akito.

He tried to change the subject, maybe feeling like continuing to talk about going up against Class A would just make us depressed.

“Hey, Keisei, how do you see Class D versus Class B playing out?” he asked, wondering about how things were for the other teams, even though we were all taking the same special exam.

“In all likelihood, Class B is going to take the win. When it comes to their teamwork, they’re not remotely even. And Class B’s overall abilities are just overwhelmingly superior, too,” said Keisei.

“Yeah, that’s true. Plus, their commander isn’t Ryuen-kun, after all. It’s Kaneda-kun.”

They probably thought there was no need to be afraid of Class D without Ryuen...and they were probably right to think that. But Ishizaki and the rest of the Class D students had wanted to fight Class B all along. While it was a surprising decision, it made sense. If I were in the position of leading Class D, I would have picked Class B as my opponent.

Class A was led by Sakayanagi, and boasted some tough opponents who never let their guard down, like Katsuragi and Hashimoto. Plus, they had the most academic ability of any class in our grade level. And far as Class C was concerned, well, I was sure no one in Class D wanted to go up against me.

Of course, they’d probably expect me to not to demonstrate my abilities out in the open. But when you got down to it, Class D’s area of superiority wasn’t academics but athleticism. And if they wanted to make the most of that, they had to pick Class B.

I was willing to bet, however, that they hadn’t made that decision under the impression they’d definitely win, or even that they’d be on equal footing with Class B. At best, this was a decision made to reduce their chances of losing. Whether or not Class D could actually win this would depend on the choices they made moving forward, and on luck. It was still nothing more than a small step in the right direction for them.

“Hey, check it out,” muttered Haruka quietly, directing our

attention to the cafeteria entrance, where Hirata was just walking in.

His gait was slow, heavy, and wobbly. He moved like a zombie, or a ghost. His eyes looked empty, in stark contrast to his usual bright, cheery self.

“He’s like...really sick, or something,” Haruka muttered quietly to herself, adding, “There’s no other way to describe it.”

Hirata did more for the class than anyone else. He always acted with the class’s best interests at heart. If we’d made it through our first year at this school without a single person falling by the wayside, it was undoubtedly due to Hirata’s efforts.

“Hirata is basically useless to us in this special exam. Going up against Class A is already tough. Now we have to shoulder a significant handicap from the get-go,” said Keisei. His words sounded cold.

“There’s...nothing we can really do, is there?”

Hirata had already been frequently approached by other students. It seemed no one had managed to get through to him so far, because there’d been no change in him at all. If anything, it seemed they’d just deepened the wound by trying to broach the subject with him.

No one in the Ayanokouji Group was particularly close to Hirata. We had concluded, obviously, that our words couldn’t reach him. That was precisely why none of us reacted strongly to Keisei implying this wasn’t our problem to solve.

5.1

WHEN CLASSES ENDED for the day, a real discussion was finally poised to begin. Hirata immediately stood up and got ready to leave, however. He was the only one who did so.

“Hirata-kun!”

“H-Hirata-kun!”

Several of the girls in class all shouted at Hirata in unison, Mii-chan among them. However, Hirata didn’t stop moving. From the outside, it looked like he didn’t care what happened to the class anymore. But it also seemed like he didn’t want to bother the class, so he was just doing the bare minimum: coming to school, attending class, and then going back to the dorms right away. He was probably going to stay locked in that cycle.

“Wait, Hirata-kun!”

“I think you’re the ones who should wait,” said Horikita.

Mii-chan and the others were about to chase after Hirata, but her words stopped them in their tracks.

“We’re about to hold a discussion. Or do you plan to make even more people be absent?” said Horikita.

“B-But...”

“There’s nothing we can do for him right now. Go on, get back to your seats.”

Horikita, having squashed their desire to run after Hirata, urged everyone to take their seats. Right now, our top priority was to put our heads together and focus on solidifying our plans as a class.

“And yet Kouenji of all people is still here, huh,” said Sudou, his voice tinged with surprise, considering how unexpected it was for Kouenji to participate.

“*Fu fu fu*. I am a member of this class, am I not? It is only natural that I participate,” replied Kouenji plainly, as if what he was saying was obvious. “However, I would like for us to settle everything today, making this our first and only discussion. I am quite busy, you see.”

“That’s a difficult ask. It’s not like we can make all the decisions necessary for this special exam in a single day. Even if we decide on all of our events today, we’ll still need further preparations so make sure we win those events,” Horikita, standing at the podium, shot his request down.

Kouenji didn’t object. Instead, he wore a wide grin. It seemed that at least for the time being, he was willing to listen.

“In that case, I will only be participating in this particular discussion,” he replied, not budging an inch.

Apparently, no matter what strategy the class came up with, the thought of working with everyone never even crossed his mind. Sudou silently stood up, but quickly sat back down after Horikita shot him a look. If people continued to fight here, our discussion would never be able to move forward.

“Well then, I’ll just keep doing what I can to get you to participate in the next meeting,” said Horikita.

Kouenji listened to Horikita’s comeback with a smile, and then crossed his arms and legs. That was his way of signaling to her, *please go ahead and start the discussion*.

“Heya, um, Horikita. I’ve got some stuff I wanna ask. Some simple questions about the events we’ll participate in and stuff,” said Ike, raising his hand.

“What is it, Ike-kun?”

Ike, hand still raised, stood up.

“They’re saying that we’re competing in seven events in total, right? But I mean, we’re not all gonna have a turn, right?” he asked.

“Who do you mean by ‘we’? And what exactly are you talking about?” asked Horikita.

“Um, well, puttin’ it in simple terms, the students who are kinda, well, awful? I mean, I was just wondering...the students who aren’t particularly good at sports and aren’t exactly blessed with book smarts aren’t really going to take a turn, right? It’s not like all seven of these events are gonna be the kind where we need tons of people. If we pick events that only a few skilled people can win at, that means a bunch of us won’t be doing anything, right?” said Ike.

There were close to forty students in each class. Even if one or two

events that required a lot of people were chosen, we'd probably have a total of twenty or thirty students competing across all seven events. Ike seemed like he was trying to say that depending on the match-ups we came up with, nearly half the students in class wouldn't be participating.

"I don't really know 'bout that, though. What if there's an event that needs, like, twenty people?" asked Kei, inserting herself into the discussion after Ike gave his opinion.

"Dude, come on. That's dumb, Karuizawa. You can only have like eleven people on a team in soccer, right? What events would need more people than that? I can't even really think of one. Y'know?" said Ike.

"Well... what about baseball?" she countered.

"Baseball has about ten people, I think. Fewer than soccer."

"Baseball has nine people," pointed out Horikita rather sharply, suddenly cutting into the conversation.

"...Well, okay. But the point is, it's not like we need *everyone*," said Ike.

"I dunno, you sure about that? American football requires eleven people, just like soccer. And rugby needs like fifteen people," said Sudou, listing events that required over ten people.

"Yeah, but like, are you *really* gonna go with stuff like rugby? I don't even know the rules to rugby, man."

While rugby was by no means an obscure sport, it was completely unfamiliar territory to anyone who hadn't had direct experience with it. It wasn't exactly something you did in gym class. I was sure the students in Class A were no exception to this, either. I couldn't really imagine a lot of scenarios that would have led to me starting to practice rugby. It was doubtful an application for rugby to be one of our events would get through, and there would probably be little benefit to anyone if it did.

"That's why I'm thinkin' that we probably won't really have a turn," said Ike.

"So, what are you trying to say?" asked Horikita.

"Well, that... That we don't really need to meet up like this or have practice sessions later or stuff like that, I guess."

“I understand that you want to take it easy. It’s certainly true that it’s mentally taxing to be made to do something that you really don’t want to do. Plus, it cuts into your precious break and holiday time,” reasoned Horikita.

“W-well, I wouldn’t really go that far, but...”

“But I’ve determined that we all need to work together.”

“I’d like to hear the reason why. If it sounds convincing, then I’ll support you with everythin’ I got,” said Sudou, speaking up.

“The number of people we’ll need depends on the rules. For example, let’s say that our opponents propose volleyball as an event. Volleyball is typically a game of six-versus-six, but we do get to edit the rules to a certain extent. What if they decide to establish that the game has a thirty-minute time limit, and that all players have to be swapped out every ten minutes? What would the required number of participants be, then?” asked Horikita.

“Uh... Let’s see, six people, changing every ten minutes, so...”

Eighteen people, going by those criteria alone. Meaning nearly half the students in class would have to participate. Moreover, having six students participate at any one time was an easy requirement for any class, in any grade level. It was likely the school would go ahead and approve such an event.

“And what if there’s more than one event like that? If you follow that line of thought, then it’s obvious to see that everyone in class might be forced to participate in two or three events. We need to be prepared for that,” said Horikita.

Of course, this all depended on the events and rules that Class A came up with. It was entirely possible that they’d mix some fake events into their submissions, just to make things tougher for us.

“I’m sure this hasn’t quite clicked for all of you yet, but this special exam is much more complex than you think,” said Horikita.

If we went through each possible event in turn, I was sure we’d come up with some completely ridiculous options. Rock Paper Scissors, like Ike had suggested, or something like a game of cards. Since we needed to win four events at any cost, we couldn’t really afford to try and look cool. We needed to come up with events that we could definitely win at, no matter what the contents of those exams were. And

we needed to pick the right people for the job.

“I don’t plan on keeping you here for too long today, either,” said Horikita.

Or rather, even if she did keep everyone here, it didn’t necessarily mean we’d come up with any good ideas right away.

“So, for today, I’d like to give you all some homework. I want you to come up with an event that you’re good at and an event that you’re sure you’d never lose at by the end of class, tomorrow. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a solo event or a team event,” said Horikita.

I wanted us to make sure one of our five final choices was a one-on-one event. Chances were good that every class was putting an event like that in their line-up, with absolute confidence that they wouldn’t lose. On the other hand, if you *did* end up losing such an event, the blowback would be immeasurable. That being said, students with special skills and talents, whose chances of victory were assured, would be in high demand.

“But there’s no point unless they’re events that the school approves of, right? I don’t really get what the criteria are.”

Events and rules that are too obtuse would be rejected by the school. The lack of clarity in regard to that requirement was probably a problem that many students were grappling with.

“Don’t have to worry about that right now. We’ll figure out whether or not they’re events the school will accept after we’ve heard from everyone and come up with a full range of options. For the time being, you’re welcome to suggest any events you can think of,” said Horikita.

“So, you’re saying that stuff like fighting games, karaoke, and so on are all okay?”

“Yes. Not a problem,” replied Horikita, once again emphasizing that no one needed to worry about that right now.

That was probably the right way of handling things. It was important for us to start by asking ourselves what we were all good at.

“What do we do if there’s nothing we’re really good at, though?” asked Haruka, directing her question at Horikita.

“If there are no events you feel particularly confident you can win, it’s fine to not submit a suggestion. It’s too risky to put forward

suggestions for events that you aren't absolutely confident in."

She probably wanted as many events as possible, but we didn't really have the time to be selective, from the sounds of it. So far, it seemed Horikita's decisions had been on the money, so I supposed I could sit back and watch.

"Is it really all right to end the discussion so soon?" asked Kouenji.

"If today's discussion is this brief, it makes it easier for you to participate next time, doesn't it, Kouenji-kun?" she replied.

"I had said I'd participate this once, and that was it," said Kouenji.

"...But it'll be bad if you don't finish the 'homework' I had assigned to you today. If you don't do that, you can't really say you *actually* participated, wouldn't it?" countered Horikita.

"Come up with an event I'm good at, was it?" said Kouenji.

He brought his hand to his chin, his smile never fading.

"That's right. If you want to say that you've really participated at least once, then you have to do that much," said Horikita.

Horikita was probably trying to say that if he couldn't do that, then he'd have to come to discussion a second time. Kouenji stood up gracefully, and then made a declaration aimed at Horikita.

"There is nothing that I cannot do. Because, you see, I am a *perfect human*."

"So, no matter what kind of opponent you're up against and no matter what kind of event you're competing in, you are absolutely sure that you'll win? You're sure of that?" said Horikita.

She was saying it partly to provoke him, but I was sure part of her couldn't help but wonder how Kouenji would answer.

"I see. Do you want me to make a promise to you, then? 'I promise to attain victory in every event in which I participate.' Like that?" said Kouenji.

"That's right. If you promise me that, then I'm fine with you doing as you please during this special exam. You won't have to participate in any future discussions, and I won't ask you for your opinion on anything from here on out," said Horikita.

"H-Hey, Suzune," said Sudou, flustered by the sound of her ridiculous proposal.

But Horikita continued speaking.

“But just remember this. If you don’t participate, or if you lose in an event...then everything you say will be met with doubt, and your classmates’ distrust of you will skyrocket.”

Not a bad idea, Horikita.

She was trying to make full use of Kouenji’s abilities on the day of the exam. Kouenji was the cream of the crop in terms of both academic and physical ability. The sole concern was his personality. Her idea was to put up with his behavior for now, to ensure he wouldn’t be frivolously absent on the day of the exam itself. How would he respond to this?

Kouenji, who’d been about to leave the classroom, stopped in his tracks.

“I will leave you this: Don’t think you can tie me down with words like that. While it is true that I am a prodigy who will never lose to anyone, it is up to *me* to decide whether or not I will use my talents for you.”

In other words, he was essentially saying “no.” It didn’t matter if people were going to question what he said, or if distrust in him would skyrocket. He was only going to do what he wanted to do. And with that, Kouenji resumed walking, and left the classroom.

“...I suppose ordinary methods aren’t going to work on him, after all,” said Horikita.

“Ugh, that guy really does look down on the rest of us... Seriously, saying he’s a prodigy who wouldn’t lose to anyone? What? I’d wipe the floor with him in basketball if we ever played a game,” spat Sudou.

I understood how he felt quite well. No matter how brilliant someone might be, it didn’t make them all-powerful. In fact, I had my doubts about whether Kouenji could actually win against Sudou in a game of basketball.

“If he’s willing to put in the work for us on the day of the exam, then we might see results, to a certain extent. I don’t know how much what I said resonated with him, but I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

It was difficult to imagine Kouenji losing, for sure. Considering

how big a game he talked and how much confidence he had, it was honestly hard to even imagine the possibility. I was sure even Sudou was aware of that.

“But do you really think he’s actually gonna, y’know, get serious on the day of the exam?” said Sudou.

“I don’t know.”

We could win if he took the exam seriously. We wouldn’t win if he didn’t.

5.2

WHEN I ARRIVED at school the next morning, Horikita informed me of something.

“I’ve decided not to count Hirata-kun as an asset in this exam,” she said.

Yesterday, Hirata had silently refused to attend an after school gathering that *Kouenji* had attended. Considering his behavior, it was no wonder Horikita had come to this decision.

“That’s a good call. There’s too much cause for concern for us to rely on him.” We could try and force him to participate, but it would probably just backfire.

“It’s fine if it’s just for this exam. But it’s possible this behavior might continue for a long time,” said Horikita.

Her concerns were by no means an exaggeration. We could all agree that everyone wanted him to recover, but right now, it was unclear how to get him back.

“Well, if you think there’s nothing to be done about Hirata’s withdrawal, there’s always the option of having him expelled, right?” I replied.

While Horikita was clearly surprised by what I’d just said, she responded calmly. “That’s... Well, yes, there is that option. That might be something I’ll have to consider. I suppose at the very least, it’s a relief he didn’t get desperate enough to say he wanted to be the commander, or anything like that,” said Horikita.

It was easy to imagine Hirata volunteering to be the commander for this special exam. Then he could deliberately lose and get expelled. Simple. But even if he had no lingering attachments left to the school, he still didn’t want to inconvenience other people, which was precisely why he hadn’t volunteered for the position. If I had to guess, the reason he was quietly attending class each day was because the class would be penalized if he got expelled. He was probably looking for the right opportunity to make his exit, when it wouldn’t inconvenience anyone else.

But that logic only applied to his *current* state.

"It's not like he'll necessarily stay a good person forever, right? He might give into despair and desperation, and then..."

"I suppose."

As Horikita had said, there was no way of knowing what Hirata would do if he grew desperate enough. We couldn't rule out the possibility of him nearly destroying the class on his way out.

"That's exactly why I don't want to have him participate right now. He's a ticking bomb. I'd also like to keep the class together, so we don't set him off," said Horikita.

Conflict within Class C was exactly what Hirata hated most of all. Horikita was being proactive, right off the bat, to keep such conflict from arising.

"Sounds rough," I replied.

"Well, you've taken on the role of commander, so I'm afraid you've got it rough, too," said Horikita.

"I'll leave everything to you. I'm sure you'll be able to come up with good ideas, even for how the commander should be involved."

She glared sharply at me. "And you're going to beat Sakayanagi-san like that?"

"Dunno."

"Dunno? Well, I intend to win. Can I get you to be a little more involved here?" said Horikita.

I didn't need her to tell me that. I already knew.

"Are you asking me to get actively involved with the class? Deciding who will participate in what events and devising the rules dictating the commander's involvement? Try and picture that, will you?"

Horikita's face stiffened. "...I can't picture that, actually. I can't picture that at all. Terrifyingly so."

"Right?"

I was, at best, someone who remained in the shadows. Even being the commander didn't change that. People would get suspicious if I suddenly started issuing directions about this and that. I'd let Horikita devise a strategy, use that as my jumping off point, then put things into practice.

As we talked, I felt the vibe in the classroom suddenly change. Hirata had arrived. Most of the students were trying not to look directly at him, but they were clearly concerned. He was just barely on time to class today.

“G-good morning, Hirata-kun,” Mii-chan called out. She was being brave, not letting the awkwardness in the air deter her.

But Hirata didn’t respond to her bravery. He ignored her and quietly went to his seat, not responding to anyone. Still, Mii-chan’s smile didn’t falter.

“Who could have imagined things would turn out like this?”

“You’re telling me.”

Despite Mii-chan’s best efforts, Hirata continued his self-imposed isolation.

“She’s the only one who hasn’t given up on trying to talk to Hirata-kun, isn’t she? I didn’t think she had that deep a connection with him...” Horikita had also noticed Mii-chan paying special attention to Hirata, and was beginning to wonder why she kept on trying.

“Isn’t it just because she’s kind?”

“Then she’d have to act the same way toward the other students. Otherwise, that theory doesn’t hold up,” said Horikita.

“That’s true.”

If that was the case, Mii-chan would have reacted the same way when Yamauchi was about to get expelled. Which meant there was only one reason she kept trying to talk to Hirata.

“She’s probably in love,” I told her.

“I suppose that’s the remaining possibility... Good grief, what a stupid sentiment,” said Horikita.

She crossed her arms in exasperation, shaking her head from side to side, as though she found the idea incomprehensible.

“Maybe we ought to limit the resources we expend on dealing with him... What do you think?” she asked.

In other words, have everyone in class leave Hirata alone for a set amount of time. “Won’t that be difficult?” I asked.

“Not at all. There’s no one going out of their way to talk to him,

except for her,” said Horikita.

Hirata had even decided to ignore Mii-chan, despite her clear devotion. There certainly weren’t many students who’d be willing to go much further than that.

“Well, whatever her motives are, I hope she forgets about it soon,” said Horikita, apparently thinking about how she could get Mii-chan to give up. “If this is all there is to it, I won’t complain. But it’s clearly having a negative effect on her.”

“Yeah. I suppose it’s true that she hasn’t been herself.”

On top of that, the entire class’s mood turned sour whenever the Hirata situation came up.

Mii-chan, undeterred by Hirata completely ignoring her, tried to approach him once again.

“Hey, um, Hirata-kun. For lunch today, I—”

She must have been thinking of inviting him to lunch when she spoke to him, but...

“Will you please leave me alone already?” said Hirata.

“I—”

The harsh words resounded throughout the classroom. He’d struck down Mii-chan’s offer before she’d even finished making it.

“You’re bothering me.”

There was nothing but coldness in his voice.

“B-but, I... I just wanted to, well, have lunch, together with you, and...” she stammered.

Mii-chan tried her hardest to keep a smile on her face, but her emotions got the better of her. Her smile began to fade.

“I’m not eating. And definitely not with you.”

He couldn’t have said “no” more firmly if he tried. Many of the girls averted their eyes, not wanting to see Hirata like this.

“Hey, hold on a second, Yousuke-kun. Don’t you think you’re taking this kind of far?” said Kei, deciding to step in.

No—given the situation, it might be more accurate to say that she’d been *forced* to step in. I could easily picture Kei’s friend group asking her to please do something. If Hirata pulled back now, then Kei

would save face, and the class would calm down for the time being.

However...

“Could you please not call me by my first name and act like we’re close? You and I have nothing to do with each other anymore,” said Hirata.

“F-Fine, okay. Well then, Hirata-kun, you’re being way too harsh on Mii-chan.” Kei corrected herself and addressed him by his last name, confident in her role as a leader who brought the girls together.

“It’s hardly any different from how *you* usually treat everyone,” he countered, not backing down.

“Wha—I’m just, you know, for the class...!”

“Could you please be quiet already? If you don’t... You understand what I’m getting at, right?” said Hirata.

The threat forcibly shut her down before she could say anything else. Hirata was saying that if she kept going, he would expose her. At least, it was inevitable Kei would interpret it that way, given that she had shared her weakness with Hirata.

“What the hell?! Whatever, forget it. I don’t even care anymore,” huffed Kei.

There was nothing more she could do at this juncture. She had no choice but to withdraw, albeit reluctantly.

“How long do you plan on standing next to me?”

Having completely shut down Kei, Hirata set his sights back on Mii-chan, who remained motionless and on the verge of tears. Now completely and thoroughly rejected by him, she sat back down in her seat, downcast. Hirata probably thought this would ensure she didn’t try to speak to him again.

“The class’s morale is taking a nosedive...”

“Kouenji doesn’t seem to mind at all, though.”

Only one man remained oblivious to the oppressive feeling hanging in the air. Even in the midst of Hirata’s spat with Mii-chan and then Kei, he seemed to be focused only on tending to himself.

“Why on earth are there so many problem children in our class?” said Kouenji.

I considered telling him that he was a problem child himself, but thought better of it.

5.3

NO MATTER HOW BAD the atmosphere was, though, time continued to move forward. Once class ended for the day, our second class discussion was at hand. To be more precise, it was actually the third if I included the one I hadn't attended, I supposed.

It was also the third day since the exam had started. It was about time we got things moving.

Once again, Hirata stood up and immediately left the classroom after class. Mii-chan looked torn. She quickly stood up, as if something had roused her. But her legs didn't budge, and she didn't take a single step. Hirata's rejection from this morning was likely playing on repeat in her mind.

Her legs buckled, and she sat back down.

"That's for the best..." Horikita muttered quietly, her cruel yet kind words just barely reaching my ears.

It was best not to get involved with Hirata right now. Horikita and the other students understood that was the safest bet. Occasionally, some jealous boys would complain about Hirata, but such complaints had been few and far between of late. Weren't those complainers the sort to despise a guy because he'd fallen from grace, I wondered? Or was it precisely because this was *Hirata* that they couldn't speak ill of him?

"Hey, Mii-chan, do you want to walk back to the dorms with me after today's discussion?" asked Kushida, having foreseen the issues that might arise with Mii-chan's mental state.

"She's pretty reliable at times like this, isn't she?"

"Guess so."

Kushida wasn't someone who'd neglect a friend in trouble. If she couldn't save Hirata, then she was compelled to at least save Mii-chan. Even if her motive was just to score points and make herself look good, it was fine as long as she was helping others. Mii-chan accepted with a gentle nod.

"Well, then, I suppose I will be going myself," said Kouenji.

Sure enough, he had no intention of participating. Kouenji left the classroom right after Hirata did, moving proudly, as if to say he'd already been endorsed by Horikita and received her seal of approval. Ultimately, it seemed there would be thirty-seven people present for this discussion.

Horikita watched Kouenji as he left, then rose to take her place behind the podium. Chabashira left the classroom, giving her a sidelong glance.

"Now, then, I hope you've all come up with things you're good at," said Horikita.

"Please wait a minute. There's something I'd like to bring to your attention before we started," said Keisei, the first to raise his hand.

"What is it, Yukimura-kun?" asked Horikita.

"I'm worried about people eavesdropping on our class discussion."

Even with the door closed, our voices would be audible to someone sticking around in the hallway outside.

"I suppose you're right. It seems we can't even have a proper discussion in this school, are we?" said Horikita.

"Shouldn't we come up with some countermeasures? For example, we could have someone stand watch or something. Honestly, I think it's bad for us to openly discuss the exam without taking some steps first," replied Keisei.

"Yes, you're exactly right," said Horikita, nodding her head. She must have understood this herself already. "But I don't think having someone stand watch would be an effective countermeasure."

"...Why?"

"Are you planning on having whoever's on guard duty warn other students not to come close to our classroom? The hallway is a shared space that all students have equal access to. In fact, that applies to this classroom, too. We have no right to deny access to students from other classes," said Horikita.

She added that if we blocked students from trying to pass through, there might be complaints filed against us.

"That's why there's no point in simply having someone stand watch," she concluded.

“Then are you planning to let everything we discuss get out for anyone to hear? Freely giving away information about our strengths and weaknesses could be extremely damaging. That doesn’t help us at all.”

“I have a solution to that. By using these, we’ll get around the issue,” said Horikita, taking something out of her pocket.

She was talking about using our phones.

“I’ll create a group chat for the entire class, which we’ll use for discussion specifically for this special exam. We can state our opinions verbally, but we’ll restrict the sharing of important information to this group chat. This way, it’ll be fine even if other classes try to eavesdrop,” said Horikita.

Keisei nodded, looking convinced. “I see... That sounds fine to me.”

“All right then, may I go ahead and send over everyone’s contact info, and create the chat?” proposed Kushida.

Horikita had no objections. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say Kushida was probably the only person in class who knew everyone’s contact information.

“Um...”

While Horikita and Keisei were still in the middle of their discussion, Mii-chan stood up.

“I’m sorry. There’s something... I, um, have to do today, so...”

“And that something would be... chasing after Hirata-kun?” asked Kushida.

Mii-chan nodded her head in response. Her footsteps were heavy as she moved to follow Hirata.

“Wait. Even if you try and go after him now, there’s no point,” said Horikita.

“What... What do you mean?” asked Mii-chan, her tone surprisingly intense.

“He’s useless right now. He’ll just drag you down with him.”

“I don’t want to abandon Hirata-kun.”

“I’m not talking about abandoning him. I’m just saying that he

should be left alone right now,” said Horikita.

“In that case, when are you going to help Hirata-kun?” asked Mii-chan.

“...That’s up to him,” said Horikita.

“You’re wrong. That’s...it’s just plain wrong. I don’t think that’s the right way,” huffed Mii-chan. She walked away, clearly done listening to what Horikita had to say.

“For crying out loud... We just need to leave him alone right now,” sighed Horikita.

Of course, not a single person in class was getting up to go chase after Mii-chan.

“I’m going to be gone for just a moment. Please don’t go home yet. Just wait here,” said Horikita.

She left the classroom, signaling her intention to chase after Mii-chan and bring her back. She probably didn’t feel like she could leave the task to anyone else.

“What a complete and utter mess... We can’t even have a proper discussion, thanks to Hirata,” spat Keisei.

It was understandable why he felt that way. After all, we were on the third day and still hadn’t made any progress.

I stood up from my seat.

“Hey, Ayanokouji, are you thinkin’ of chasin’ after them, too? Suzune said to wait though,” said Sudou, giving me a word of caution.

It was certainly true that things would just get worse and worse if people kept leaving like this.

“I know,” I replied, ignoring Sudou and walking out into the hallway.

“You know? Hey!” he shouted.

Once I made it into the hall, I called out. “Horikita.”

“...I believe I instructed you not to move,” she replied.

“If you’re planning on forcing Mii-chan to come back, you don’t have to be the one to do it. I’ll go. Your job is to bring the class together,” I told her.

“You’re the commander. That’s not something you can push onto

someone else, you understand? You won't be able to demonstrate the full power of your position as commander if you don't assess your class's abilities," said Horikita.

"You can help me figure that part out later. Besides, there's nothing I can do about it, anyway."

"That's not the iss—"

"Do you think you can really fix Hirata's problem?" I asked.

"Well..."

"Someone who thinks neglecting him is the best course of action isn't someone who should be chasing after him."

Horikita was one of the main reasons he was this broken. She shouldn't be the one to approach him.

"In that case, do you...think that *you* can?" she asked.

"It depends on the efforts of the people around him," I told her.

"If that was the solution, this should have been fixed a long time ago."

Many students had reached out to Hirata in concern. Not just Mii-chan. Horikita was beginning to question Mii-chan's actions precisely because nothing was proving to be effective.

"Anyway, we'll pick this up later. I'm gonna lose sight of Mii-chan and Hirata," I told her.

"Hurry on back," she told me.

She sounded like a mother sending their child off somewhere.

As I began walking, I suddenly bumped into Hashimoto. A simple coincidence? Yeah, probably not. I was guessing he was here to spy on Class C, and also that he'd overheard my conversation with Horikita just now.

Hashimoto didn't seem surprised. He called out to me with a smile, like he found something amusing. "Yo, Ayanokouji."

That being said, I didn't have the time to stop for a casual chat right now. "Sorry, but I'm kind of in a hurry."

"If you're going after your classmate, she ran that way."

I responded to him with a subtle nod, and then headed after Mii-chan. Hirata's behavior had been the same these past two days. He'd

likely gone straight back to his dorm room after class ended, so he wouldn't run into anyone.

SHORTLY AFTER LEAVING the school building, I spotted Mii-chan.

And just ahead of her, I could see Hirata, on his way to the dorm. Even though Mii-chan had gathered the courage to leave the classroom and pursue Hirata, she didn't seem brave enough to actually call out to him. His rejection of her from this morning was probably still playing on repeat in her brain.

"You're not gonna try and talk to him?" I asked.

"...Ayanokouji-kun."

Mii-chan noticed me. I caught up and walked alongside her, the two of us looking at Hirata's back.

"I guess I'm just feeling a little hesitant..." she said softly.

That made sense, considering how he'd shot her down when she tried to talk to him that morning.

"In that case, why did you chase after him? Everyone else has given up on him," I told her.

"That's... I don't know."

Apparently, she hadn't given it that much thought. Mii-chan seemed to ponder, now, exactly why she'd chased after Hirata. It probably wasn't just because she had a crush on him. She must have landed on something after a few moments of thought, because she spoke up.

"Everyone's saying that we should leave Hirata-kun alone right now. But...I think that's wrong. I think it's exactly when someone is suffering, when they're in pain, that you have to help them. So..."

"So you don't mind if he comes to hate you because of it, Mii-chan?" I asked.

Once was probably fine, but if she kept trying to talk to him, Hirata's responses would become increasingly harsher. You couldn't say for certain that he might not end up yelling at her angrily.

"...I don't want that to happen, no," said Mii-chan, shaking her head as she thought back to Hirata's rejection from earlier. "I'd hate for that to happen, but...if hating me makes Hirata-kun feel like he's not

alone anymore, even just a little bit, then that would be a relief. I think...in that case, I'd be okay with him hating me!" she asserted strongly.

She was acting tough. Acting tough so that her heart wouldn't break. I found myself thinking, however, that the power in her eyes was undoubtedly the real deal.

"Am I doing the wrong thing, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"No. You're right."

Neglecting Hirata right now definitely wouldn't make things better. If we did that, we'd just be trapping him in a deep darkness that he wouldn't be able to escape.

"So, are you going to talk to him?" I asked.

"Yes!"

Mii-chan moved forward, taking one heavy step at a time. Then she ran, closing the distance between herself and Hirata. Hirata was probably going to be pretty angry with me later, but this was the best course of action right now. If we wanted to back Hirata into a corner, Mii-chan's kindness was the most effective way to do that while also inflicting the most damage. And then, in the near future, his heart would break, and he'd probably be forced to choose to drop out of school.

As I made my way back to the classroom, Hashimoto, fiddling with his phone, saw me.

"Yo."

"You manage to steal any information from Class C?" I asked.

"Nah, unfortunately. Can't really get my hands on anything with all the important bits of info being communicated over text, y'know."

Hashimoto shrugged his shoulders and put his phone away. It seemed he'd overheard Horikita's idea to use our phones.

"I've been waitin' for you to come back. So, how'd it go? After your chased after your classmate, I mean."

"As you can see, I came back empty-handed." I emphasized the fact that I hadn't brought Mii-chan back with me.

"Man, seems real tough and all. Bein' the rock for your class, having everyone come to you."

“Bringing the class together is Horikita’s job. She’s got the tough gig.”

“So, did you have to become the commander because you have a Protection Point?” Hashimoto was being chattier than usual, probably trying to get as much information out of me as he could.

“We’re up against Class A. Our class never stood a chance of winning. Since there’s no other way to avoid expulsion, I just think it was the only option we had,” I replied.

“I see. I suppose you’ve got a point. Well—I came here to do a little light reconnaissance, even though our princess told me not to bother. Still, I thought I’d try to pick up whatever intel I could. But I guess you guys weren’t that stupid, after all.”

Hashimoto didn’t sound entirely convinced, but he patted me lightly on the shoulder and walked away, seemingly having given up. I watched him go and then returned to the classroom, where a discussion of which events to choose had just begun. I conveyed to Horikita with my eyes that I’d been unable to retrieve Mii-chan, and I took my seat. She didn’t press the matter.

Discussion of everyone’s strengths and weaknesses seemed to be progressing reasonably well via the group chat, with answers from over half of the students in class. Things went pretty much how I imagined they would, based on what I already knew plus the supplementary information I’d gotten from Kei.

First, there were sports that some students were good at. For example, Sudou with basketball, Onodera with swimming, and Akito with archery. Then there were students confident in their academic skills, like Horikita and Keisei, who listed off subjects they felt they could score especially high marks in. However, unlike with sports, where you could just focus your talents on a specific field, tests of academic skill posed a significant challenge unless you excelled in nearly every subject.

“Ayanokouji-kun, were there students from the other classes in the hallway?” asked Horikita.

“It seems someone was there until a little while ago, but whoever it was left once they realized that we were holding the discussion via our phones,” I told her.

“I see. Well, I suppose that’s to be expected.”

Sudou, having understood from our conversation that no one was spying on us now, made his move.

“Basketball! We *definitely* gotta do basketball!” he shouted, appealing to Horikita directly.

“I don’t doubt your ability. Are you sure that you won’t lose to anyone, no matter what class they’re from?” she asked.

“There are lots of ways you can play basketball. If we choose a one-on-one match, I’ll definitely win. You’ll see.”

Basketball was typically played five-on-five on the court, but there were several derivatives of the game. One of those was the one-on-one match Sudou had just proposed. If the rules were solid, then it should be a safe enough bet to qualify as an event in the school’s eyes.

“I suppose so. There’s no doubting your skill as a player. In a one-on-one match, I think you would most certainly score a win,” said Horikita.

“Definitely!”

“But it’s not that simple for this special exam,” said Horikita.

“W-why?”

“Because we can only choose a single one-on-one event,” said Horikita.

One of the rules dictating what events we could submit was that we couldn’t have two events with the same number of participants.

“If we were allowed to choose as many one-on-one events as we wanted, then we’d just use people who specialized in those kinds of events. Onodera-san is particularly good at swimming. If we’re just going after wins, we could also have her compete in a one-on-one swimming match,” said Horikita.

That way, we could easily secure one win for our class. Of course, there was a risk Onodera might have to compete against a guy, but considering her times, she’d have a sufficiently high chance of winning.

“If we had a competition that tested English speaking skills, Wang-san consistently gets near-perfect scores. There are more than a few students in our class who stand a high chance of winning a one-on-one match in this manner, in a field they specialize in,” she added.

Sudou’s spirits looked a little dampened. He’d been banking on

securing our class's victory.

"I'm a total beginner when it comes to basketball, so this is a genuine question. Let's suppose you were to play a regular game of basketball, meaning a five-on-five match. And let's say the other four people on your team were girls who aren't particularly good at sports. Do you think you'd definitely be able to win, with a team like that?" she asked.

"To be completely honest, I'm pretty confident I could carry the team and win by myself, even if my teammates aren't so hot. But if I'm up against experienced players on the other side, then... Well, I can't say for sure," said Sudou.

"I appreciate your sincerity, and respect you for not pointlessly bragging about how you'd win no matter what. Which is why..."

Horikita paused for a moment before making her suggestion.

"I'd like you to think long and hard about this. It would certainly be a shame to discard basketball as one of our events. So, pick a team you think you can definitely win with in a five-on-five game, with minimal effort. If I'm suitably convinced, I promise to submit to the school as one of our events," said Horikita.

"...Got it," said Sudou.

Sudou nodded, accepting what Horikita said. Then he sat back in his seat and began simulating various scenarios in his head.

That was the hard part. Sudou was quite athletic. While no one had any doubt that he'd be at his absolute best in a game of basketball, he was a student we could use in a variety of ways. In an exam like this, he was an ace up our sleeve. We had to keep in mind that it might be a waste to use him in a one-on-one event.

Besides, we should probably take as much time as we needed to rationally assess whether or not we really wanted basketball as one of our events. Even if we did have a chance of winning a five-on-five, our opponents weren't stupid. If basketball was one of our ten events, then Class A could easily assume Sudou was going to be taking part. They might put five solid people on their team and manage to win, even against Sudou. Or, conversely, they could abandon the idea of winning that event, and focus their attention on the others.

Horikita and the others continued to discuss matters such as these

for quite a while. I exited the group chat, but pretended to be monitoring it still, looking down at my phone. After all, I was the commander. I wasn't going to be asked about my strengths and weaknesses. I was participating in these discussions simply as a formality. It didn't change my plan to leave all of the details to Horikita.

After roughly an hour of discussion, Horikita had finished collecting everyone's input. From this point on, she was probably going to shift her focus to holding individual meetings rather than having the entire class gather like this.

THURSDAY MORNING arrived. It felt like it was going to be a colder day than usual while on my way to school, even though spring had come.

“Gooooo mooorning! It’s cold, isn’t it?”

I heard a chipper voice behind me. I didn’t think they were calling out to me, so I ignored them and kept walking. But the person speaking got flustered and called out once more.

“H-hey, wait, wait a minute! Ayanokouji-kun?”

Apparently, the greeting *had* been aimed at me, after all. When I turned around to look behind me, I saw Hoshinomiya-sensei, the homeroom teacher for Class B.

“Hold on, wait up a minute!”

She grabbed my hand with her cold ones. I couldn’t help but wonder just what kind of female teacher would just casually grab a male student by the hand like this.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think that you were talking to me. Can I help you with something?” I asked.

“Can’t I talk to you without needing anything?” she replied.

She looked up at me with upturned eyes, her hand still holding onto mine. Only someone who knew exactly how cute they were would act this way. Maybe it was because I had been watching Kushida’s every move, but I was beginning to understand these things.

“Well, I’m not saying that, but...”

I pulled my hand free from Hoshinomiya-sensei’s grip, somewhat forcefully. For some reason, she let out a little chuckle when I did. A wicked grin appeared on her face.

“Hey, did you manage to snag yourself a girlfriend?” she asked.

“Nope, not at all. There are no signs I’m going to be able to, either.”

“Huh, really? Even though you’ve been blessed with such a wonderful environment? What a waste.”

What kind of ‘wonderful environment’?

“Oh my, you don’t get it, huh?” she teased. Her next words were whispered directly into my ear. “Well, that’s no fun. The students here are in the kind of environment where it’s suuuuper easy to fall in love.”

“Why’s that?”

When I asked her that question, Hoshinomiya-sensei was slightly taken aback.

“You really don’t get it?” she asked.

“No, not at all,” I answered.

When I said that, she patted me lightly on the shoulder several times.

“You know, when I get a really good look at you, you are pretty cute, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Honestly, I had no clue what she was trying to say.

“Let me tell you a little something... I’m honestly not a fan of how things are right now. I’ve been thinking about this for a while now, and I think it’s a problem that the boys and girls are living in the same dormitory.”

“Is that so?” I asked.

Since all our rooms were separated, I didn’t really see the problem. I moved away from Hoshinomiya-sensei slightly, trying to get some personal space. But when I did, she moved in closer again.

“This is something I heard from a friend of mine, but it was apparently tradition for the kids who got jobs at a particular company to go through two months of training in the company dorms. There were two to a room, and of course, the genders were separated,” she said.

“Okay.”

Every time I tried to put some distance between us, she’d just move in closer again, so I gave up and just listened to her story.

“But it’s easy for trouble to start brewing when two people are staying in the same room. One guy hated natto, apparently. He couldn’t stand the smell of it. He even hated looking at it. So of course, the first thing he said to the guy he was sharing his room with was, ‘Don’t *ever* eat natto in front of me,’ I guess. But get this, the roommate loved

natto. So even though the guy said he hated it, the roommate figured it'd be fine as long as he didn't force him to eat it. And so he ate natto in front of his roommate, who hated the stuff. And as a result, well, the guy who hated natto got super mad and stormed out of the dorm, I guess."

What on earth was this woman trying to say? It didn't sound to me like it had much of anything to do with guys and girls living together in the dorms.

"Okay, I'm sure you're thinking what I just said has nothing to do with guys and girls living together, but this is important," she added, before continuing on. "Anyhow, the company found out what happened, and the room-sharing system was abolished that same year. Starting the next year, all new hires at the company were given their own single rooms. Just like what we have here at this school. And as a result, there was a huge change from years past. What do you think that was?"

"I'm guessing it was a problem with guys and girls, like you were getting at before?" I asked in return.

"Yep. When the company was using the shared-room system, there were only one or two instances where people started dating, at most. But the minute they switched over to the single room system, they had like seven or eight couples getting together. I mean, even if you meet a girl you like and you go over to her room to hang out, when you have roommates, that means there's gonna be another person in the way, right? It makes it easier for rumors to get around, too, so of course everyone has their guard up, and people don't want to fall in love. But..."

With single-person rooms, guys and girls could meet up without hesitation. *And* in private.

"The change caused the rate of romantic developments to shoot, like, *way* up," she concluded.

So, that was why she was surprised that I hadn't gotten a girlfriend yet, huh?

"Okay, then let me ask you this. Are there lots of students who actually have boyfriends or girlfriends right now?" I asked.

"Well, actually, it doesn't seem like anyone's really getting together this year."

Hey. In that case, isn't it wrong of you to be giving me a hard time about this? It would probably be pointless for me to actually say that to her, so I swallowed my words.

"Maybe your theory is wrong, sensei?" I asked.

"No way," she replied, with total conviction. "You just don't understand just how fortuitous an environment you're in right now, as a student."

I couldn't tell if this was coming from positive thinking or something else.

"You'll regret it, if you don't. Wouldn't it be better to fall in love now, while you have this chance?" she added.

What in the world was this person babbling about to a student—someone who should normally be devoting themselves to their studies? I was well aware of the fact that there were all kinds of teachers out there, but in some ways, she might be a kind I'd never seen before.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Hm? Oh, you're wondering what age range is acceptable to me? Sorry, but dating a first-year high school student is pretty much off the table—"

"I'm not asking that at all."

"I know, I know. This is the point where you should be laughing, y'know?" she teased.

I was supposed to be laughing? I felt like I was getting swept up in her incomprehensible but compelling vortex.

"So, what is it? Come on, tell me, tell me!"

Despite the fact that she'd taken us off topic herself, she forcefully pulled the conversation back on track.

"You're endorsing the idea of romantic relationships, but it seems like it'd be pretty difficult for students to have romantic relationships with students from other classes," I reasoned.

"Why?" she asked in return.

"Because the classes are competing against one another. It'd just sow the seeds of discord, wouldn't it?" I stated matter-of-factly.

I'd said something I thought was perfectly reasonable, but I saw

her eyes light up.

“That just makes it even better, doesn’t it?” she replied.

“...It does?” I replied, dumbfounded.

“Normally, you’d do absolutely everything in your power to help out your class, right? But your boyfriend or girlfriend is in a rival class. And that causes so much anguish and conflict. And tada, you have *drama!*” she exclaimed.

She nodded repeatedly after saying that, apparently deeply moved by her own words.

“I mean, it’s obvious the more complex the relationship you’re talking, the more intense the competition will become, right?” she added.

“Well, yeah, I suppose that’s true.”

Honestly, she was right about that. It wouldn’t be surprising for some people to turn traitor for the sake of their lover. And it would be virtually impossible to monitor and manage all such relationships.

“What are you two talking about?”

“Speak of the devil, eh?” said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

Speak of the devil? *That was an odd choice of words, Hoshinomiya-sensei.* The person in question didn’t seem to understand what she was getting at either, at all.

Hoshinomiya-sensei abruptly ended our conversation and put some distance between me and her. “We were just chit-chatting, Sae-chan. Come on, you don’t have to give me such a scary look.”

“He’s my student.”

“You do seem to be *very* concerned about Ayanokouji-kun. Well, I suppose we’ll find out whether he’s really capable or not in the special exam coming up soon, right? He’s going to be going up against Sakayanagi-san, who is rumored to be the very best the school has to offer.”

“In that case, there’s really no need for you to force yourself to be involved.”

“Oh, well, yes, that’s certainly true. You’re quite right, Sae-chan.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei smiled, teasing Chabashira. She didn’t look at

all like she'd just reached out to talk to me for no reason at all.

After Hoshinomiya-sensei had left, Chabashira shot me a sidelong glance, for some reason. It seemed she was wondering what we were talking about.

"Do you want to know what we were talking about?" Since we were on our way to school, I spoke up, taking notice of her curiosity.

She didn't say anything, apparently waiting for me to continue.

"We were talking about the roommate system."

"Roommate? ...Ugh, that stupid story."

Chabashira seemed to know the story already. In other words, I could assume the company Hoshinomiya-sensei had been talking about was actually this school. And I could interpret *that* to mean the school had originally had a shared-room system, rather than giving students single rooms.

I supposed it was a story I could corroborate pretty easily, if I wanted to. But I didn't care.

Chapter 6: Traps, Home Cooking, and a Favor

A RATHER UNUSUAL INCIDENT occurred the same day. It happened at the start of lunch break, when the Ayanokouji Group made their way to the cafeteria. As I walked with Akito and the others, we heard someone shout, somewhat aggressively.

“Come on, Ichinose. We should definitely say something about this! We gotta protest!”

The person who shouted those words was none other than Shibata, from first-year Class B. He was accompanied by two other students from Class B: Ichinose and Kanzaki.

“Huh, now *there’s* something you don’t see every day. It’s pretty unusual for Shibata-kun to get that angry,” said Haruka.

“Yeah, that’s definitely not something I’d expect,” replied Akito.

Their surprise was understandable.

“Really?” asked Airi.

She didn’t seem to know anything about it at all, since she didn’t really involve herself with the other classes. Shibata was part of the soccer club. He was bright, cheerful, popular, though a little different from Hirata. As far as I knew, he wasn’t the kind of person to raise his voice like that.

“But isn’t it possible that it was just a simple coincidence?” replied Ichinose calmly, trying to reason with the upset Shibata.

However, Shibata seemed to be convinced otherwise, because he immediately denied the possibility.

“It’s not. That was the third time just today. Get it? They’re definitely trying to pick a fight!” he asserted.

Kanzaki noticed us on our way to lunch, and gently gestured to Shibata, who looked over at us with an embarrassed expression on his face. He was trying to play it cool, but it was already too late. There was an awkward silence.

“Hey, were you guys just on your way to lunch?” asked Ichinose,

calling out to us.

She wasn't addressing a specific person, but rather our group as a whole. My friends hadn't really interacted much with the leader of Class B, so they felt flustered, unsure of how to respond. Haruka, standing next to me, jabbed me in the side with her elbow. I decided to speak up on behalf of the group.

“...Yeah. We're headed to the café. What's up?”

After hearing my answer, Ichinose clapped her hands together happily.

“Oh, hey, what a coincidence. We're headed there too,” she replied.

I noticed something a little strange. Normally, Ichinose always made eye contact with me when we talked. But today, she wasn't.

“Hey, if you like, how about we all have lunch together?” she asked.

Everyone in the Ayanokouji group exchanged glances with one another, a bit bewildered at this unexpected invitation.

“What are you doing, Ichinose?” asked Kanzaki. He sounded a little flustered and confused, probably because he hadn't expected Ichinose to offer us something like that.

“What am I doing...? We're not competing against Class C or anything, so it's not a problem, is it?” she replied?

“Well, that's true, it's not, but...”

Kanzaki didn't seem that open to the idea of inviting us to join them for lunch. But, if Ichinose had already settled on it, there was no way he could refuse her. We, on the other hand, were left a little unsure of what to do or how to answer...

“Come on, time's a-wastin'! Let's go!” said Ichinose cheerfully.

When she smiled like that, there was no way anyone could refuse her.

6.1

WE JOINED TWO TABLES in a corner of the café and ate lunch together. Not only was this group made up of Class B and Class C students, but it was just a generally odd combination of folks.

“Sorry for inviting you to join us out of the blue like that. It’s my treat though, so please, eat up!” Ichinose apologized, then announced happily.

“Are you sure about that, Ichinose?” said Kanzaki, reacting strongly to her offering to treat us.

In the last special exam, Ichinose had made a deal with Class D. She’d had her class cast their praise votes for Ryuuen to keep him from being expelled, and in return, she’d saved a Class B student from the same fate. Doing so should have used up all her private points. I was sure she’d come up with some way to get by and make ends meet, but it wasn’t like she could afford to live lavishly.

“We were already planning to eat here, like we usually do, so we can cover ourselves,” I replied.

Everyone in the group nodded in agreement.

“I kind of strong-armed you into coming, though, so you don’t have to force yourself...” said Ichinose quietly.

“Nah, it’s all right. This way, we can all eat without feeling guilty.” I declined her offer, using the pretense of us then being able to enjoy our lunch as equals.

“So...why *did* you invite us to join you, anyway?” asked Keisei, apparently unable to hold himself back any longer.

“Well, I guess it’s because you all just seemed so shocked at how Shibata-kun was acting earlier. I figured it might be less confusing for everyone if I told you the whole story up front, rather than letting wild speculation get around,” reasoned Ichinose.

Her judgment might be correct. If Ichinose hadn’t approached us, we’d probably have discussed what happened with Shibata among ourselves for a while, wondering why he was so angry. We might have talked to a third party and unintentionally gotten the word out, too.

“Are you sure it’s okay to tell them?” asked Kanzaki.

“Do you really think this is something we need to keep on the down-low?” asked Ichinose.

“We can’t rule out the possibility that someone in Class C might be involved.”

“Even if there is, it wouldn’t really make much difference, would it?”

“Yeah, Ichinose’s got a point there. Honestly, we’re just grumbling,” said Shibata.

As soon as Shibata spoke up, Kanzaki shot him a sharp glare.

“Wh-what, Kanzaki?”

“Nothing...”

Shibata didn’t seem to understand the true meaning of what Kanzaki was trying to tell him with that look. He was probably trying to rebuke Shibata for so carelessly using the word “grumbling,” but the other students didn’t seem to notice anyway, so it didn’t matter.

“Anyway, now that they’ve heard this much, don’t you think it’d be best to just tell them?” asked Ichinose.

“...I suppose.”

Shibata’s thoughtless comment had apparently been the deciding factor, causing Kanzaki to back down.

“To put it simply, it seems like Class D has been, well, kind of harassing us lately,” said Ichinose.

“*Kind of?*” replied Shibata, incredulous. “They’ve been messing with me, Nakanishi, and even Beppu. It’s like, I dunno. They’re messing with us for no reason at all or like, they’re just *following* us around. I heard Beppu was nearly scared to death when Albert silently cornered him against a wall!”

Kanzaki must have decided it wouldn’t really matter at this point if he spoke up or not, since we’d already heard this much. So, he joined the conversation, too. “I interviewed both Nakanishi and Beppu. Their stories check out.”

Which meant Class D had been targeting some Class B students since the start of the special exam.

“But it’s not like anyone’s actually gotten in a fistfight, have they?”

“For now, no.”

So Class D students had just been intimidating kids and following them around. They hadn’t caused any physical damage so far. Of course, if they *did* end up crossing that line and resorting to physical violence, there’d be trouble.

“I guess this is just their way of trying to put pressure on us. I suspect their plan is to keep this kind of harassment going until the big exam day, in order to wear us down and dull our judgment.”

“Come on, gimme a break, man. Class D is just flat out scary, that’s who they are. I mean, even Class C has gotten caught up in their shenanigans before. I’m sure they know what we’re talking about, y’know?” said Shibata.

Shibata was probably referring to the time Sudou got in a fight with Ishizaki and Komiya. Keisei, who had been quietly listening to the conversation so far, now opened his mouth to speak.

“I know it’s probably weird to get advice from another class, but come to think of it, this isn’t unusual. It’s certainly true that Class D has a reputation for being the bad guys, but I think a certain degree of pressure is only to be expected from this exam. In fact, we’ve had people from Class A trying to spy on us, apparently,” said Keisei.

“Huh, really?” asked Shibata.

Keisei responded with a nod before proceeding to tell them how a student from Class A hung around near our classroom and tried to eavesdrop on our conversations.

“Class D is desperate, too. I wonder if they’re also trying to get their hands on whatever information they can get?” said Shibata.

He seemed totally convinced, just based off of the meager information he’d gotten from Class C. That being said, it certainly seemed like Class B was the one suffering the most here.

“Well, there’s no denying the fact that if we played it straight, our class would definitely have the advantage in this exam. We should expect the possibility that they’ll continue to harass us like this until they get to the very limit of what’s considered acceptable without violating school rules,” reasoned Kanzaki.

The only part of this theory that stuck out to me was the fact Class D was only harassing *some* students. Was it possible they'd decided it was too risky to go after Ichinose and Kanzaki...? Or did they have another goal in mind?

"I can't imagine this is a strategy that Kaneda-kun thought of, though. Maybe Ishizaki-kun?"

"Yeah, maybe."

"I know it worries you, but we need to just do the best we can. We'll pick events that make good use of our class's unity, so that we don't let our teamwork get disrupted, and try our hardest on the day of the actual exam. Right?" asked Ichinose.

Kanzaki and Shibata both nodded in agreement.

"Meaning you're not going to do anything in response to Class D, Ichinose-san? Not even reconnaissance?" asked Keisei.

"That's right. We're not going to do that. We're going to focus on dealing with the ten events that come out next week," said Ichinose.

Basically, that meant they intended to continue fighting as themselves, focusing on bettering themselves. They wouldn't be sidetracked by the hunt for information, but would face things head-on, relying on the truth. A solid and reliable approach.

"Wow. I don't know what to say, except that you Class B folks really are incredible?" said Keisei, astonished. He continued, "But wouldn't you normally do whatever it takes to beat a class above you? I mean, if things like spying and silent intimidation are effective, then you should probably use them. To be honest, focusing on yourself, not doing anything to your opponent, taking the high road—that's not something our class could possibly do."

"Well, I don't know if I'd put it like that. Maybe it's just that we're not clever enough to do that kind of stuff?" replied Ichinose, with a smile.

"Anyway, I think I understand what you wanted to tell us. If we went around casually telling people about Shibata being all angry earlier, we'd basically be signaling to everyone that Class D's strategy is working," said Keisei, having unraveled the meaning behind why Ichinose had invited us all out to lunch.

If Class D found out what kind of damage their harassment was

doing to Class B, it would just encourage them to keep it up, meaning Class B would have even more to deal with than they already did. Class B wanted to hold their ground instead and maintain that Class D's strategy was pointless.

"Exactly. Which is why I'd like to ask you to please not spread it around too much, if at all possible," said Ichinose.

"It wouldn't benefit us at all to do so. And we don't want to make an enemy of Class B," answered Keisei, accepting her request.

Haruka, Akito, and then Airi all nodded in agreement, without hesitation.

"Thank you so much, everyone!" exclaimed Ichinose.

As she did so, our eyes met for the first and only time that day. In that moment, she casually brushed her hair away from her face. As if carried on the wind, a faint citrusy scent tickled my nose. She quickly looked away, returning her gaze to our group as a whole.

Ichinose really was acting a little strange today. Not that I was going to point that out right now.

6.2

WHEN LUNCH HAD ENDED and we parted ways with Ichinose and the folks from Class B, Haruka spoke up.

“Wow, Ichinose-san sure is cute, isn’t she? Oh, and that last smile she gave us at the end there? Ugh, it’s like, not fair. Don’t you think so?”

“Me? Not really...” replied Keisei.

“Hey, Yukimuu, your face is turning red just thinking about it!” she teased.

“Is not!” he protested.

“Come on, there’s no point in denying it. I’m a girl, and even I think she’s cute. I bet guys are totally head over heels for her,” said Haruka.

Airi must have agreed, because she was nodding along vigorously.

“You think so too, right? Miyachi? Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Haruka.

Since Akito and I didn’t want to be targeted like Keisei, we just wore wry smiles and dodged the question.

“You know, I might have just been imagining it, but... Has Ichinose-san ever used perfume before?” asked Airi.

“Oh, hey, I picked up on that too. She was wearing some kind of citrus-scented perfume, right?” said Haruka.

“Yeah. That might have been what surprised me the most. Maybe she’s got something on her mind or something?” said Airi.

“Hey, what do the three of you think?” Haruka asked, posing us guys a question we couldn’t possibly know the answer to.

“Wait, was she wearing perfume? I mean, even if she was, maybe it’s just because she felt like it or something?” replied Keisei, matter-of-factly.

His offhanded comment prompted an openly exasperated sigh from Haruka.

“Ugh, boys, really... They never really notice the small changes,

do they?” sighed Haruka.

“...More importantly, it looks like we’re not the only ones having trouble. It seems Class B has a tough road ahead of them, too.” Akito changed the subject, probably not wanting to deal with any more of Haruka’s teasing.

“Class D probably can’t afford to care about appearances if they’re going to win against a higher-ranked class. It’s possible they might escalate their harassment even further, going forward,” said Keisei, taking this chance to bail on the previous conversation and hopping onto the topic Akito presented.

His prediction was probably accurate. It seemed there were only three people being harassed so far, but it wouldn’t be surprising if the number of victims crept up.

“And Ryuen’s nowhere to be found, either. So they probably won’t stand a chance of winning if they *don’t* do at least that much.”

“Even so, it feels to me like they’re pretty much following Ryuen-kun’s example, anyway, and doing what he would’ve done.”

True enough. Applying pressure like this was definitely the kind of strategy Ryuen would come up with.

“But it’s pointless, isn’t it? That’s not going to be enough to break Class B’s defenses. After talking with them today, I thought, maybe it’s a *good* thing that we’re up against Class A this time. Because I really don’t want to be fighting Class B,” said Keisei.

“Huh? What makes you think that, Yukimuu?” asked Haruka.

“I mean, the depth of their solidarity and the fact that they approach things honestly, without overestimating themselves, is incredible. I don’t think any other class can even touch them in that area. It allows them to consistently produce good results, no matter the test. I don’t think we could beat them,” said Keisei.

Class B would pull through anything and everything, all while holding to a higher standard than the rest of us. At least, that was what Keisei seemed to be afraid of.

“But like, even if they’re above average at, like, everything, it doesn’t really mean anything if they lose anyway,” said Haruka.

Even if they got eighty or ninety points in all seven events, if their opponents got a hundred, they’d still lose.

“How do you think we can keep winning when we don’t even know what the seven final events will be on the day of the exam? Sure, there might be some events that we Class C and Class D students specialize in and can win at. But we’re also the classes that could end up losing miserably and getting terrible results,” said Keisei.

“I see... You might be right about that,” said Airi, nodding several times in response, convinced that what Keisei said was correct.

“Hey, hold up!”

We were about to turn the corner in a hallway, with Keisei walking at the head of the group. Haruka shouted and grabbed his arm, getting him to stop.

“Wha—”

Keisei tried to ask her what was up, but she placed her hand over his mouth and pointed in front of us. She was pointing at Ike and Shinohara, who were walking just a little ways in front of us.

“H-hey, Shinohara,” said Ike.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Well... Umm.”

“Come on, spit it out. What?” said Shinohara.

We all stood there silently, listening in on the conversation that was going on just a short distance away from us.

“...Hey, uh, on Sunday, are... y-you, y’know, f-free?” he asked.

“Sunday? I don’t really have particular plans or anything on that day, no, but... Why?”

“Why? Well, uh, it’s just, I dunno, I was wondering if maybe you’d wanna hang out. Or something. Like if we could go somewhere.”

We could barely hear their conversation. Haruka and Airi exchanged looks, apparently really enjoying this. Keisei and Akito, on the other hand, were the exact opposite. They looked entirely exasperated.

“Sunday’s White Day, isn’t it? Do you think that maybe Shinohara-san gave Ike-kun chocolate on Valentine’s or something?” asked Airi.

“Maybe,” replied Haruka.

Although Shinohara had sounded skeptical of Ike’s invitation at

first, she seemed to gradually understand what was going on here.

“Well, you know, it’s just, like, since you gave me chocolate and all, I, uh...thought I’d, y’know, return the favor,” said Ike.

“You’re being so sincere, even though that was just obligation chocolate. I mean, do you even have the money to do something like that?” she asked.

“I do have a little saved up... B-But anyway, if you don’t want to, it’s okay, we can just forget about it,” said Ike.

“...I never said I was against it, though,” said Shinohara.

“Th-then...?”

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea, okay? It’s just that our special exam is coming up soon and this is our last chance to relax a little. And if you’re offering to treat me, then I’d feel bad turning you down,” said Shinohara.

For some reason, this reminded me of the story I’d heard this morning, about the whole roommate thing. Various small seeds of love might have begun to take root in places I didn’t even know about.

“Let’s go.”

“H-Huh? Hey, wait! It’s just getting juicy!”

“Don’t stick your nose into other people’s relationships.”

Akito grabbed Haruka by the nape of her neck and pulled her away, walking her in the opposite direction.

“Come on, what’s the harm in listening just a little bit longer? I’m getting butterflies!” she protested.

“I’m not,” he answered.

“Ugh, this is exactly why I say you boys are so clueless... Right, Airi?” huffed Haruka.

“Y-yeah. I kind of feel like I’m getting butterflies too, a little... But it’d be pretty embarrassing if they saw us, wouldn’t it?” said Airi.

“Well, yeah, I guess, but I’m sure *they’d* feel more embarrassed if that happened.”

I supposed that if we were to get in the way here, we might interrupt the budding of this new relationship.

6.3

WE WERE STILL in the phase when everyone was suggesting events that they were good at. The after-class gatherings become less and less frequent with every passing day. As that happened, though, the huge chat group for Class C discussion became more and more active. Kouenji and Hirata still hadn't contributed to the chat, but the way it was structured, anyone could participate at any time of day.

As it turned out, this might have been a better fit for our class, judging from the active exchange of opinions in the chat, because people didn't generally summon the courage to speak up out loud, in person. That was the sense I got at a glance, as an outside observer, anyway. I was simply waiting for Horikita to finish everything that I'd trusted her to handle. It would be fine to think about our strategy and what part the commander would play later.

Still, there were a few things that remained worrisome. Kouenji and Hirata. Hirata in particular, at the moment. Horikita probably had no way to resolve that issue herself right now. Judging by the fact that the two of them hadn't joined in the group chat, they probably weren't actively preparing themselves for the special exam.

In Kouenji's case, his absence was pretty much par for the course. Hirata's absence, though, was painful.

Hirata had changed almost completely. Even now, he continued acting as though he were an entirely different person. For lack of a better term, he was basically a tumor. An eyesore. Although he was an important person, no one could touch him. There was basically nothing anyone could do but just pray the swelling would go down. It was a real shame, since he'd be a jack of all trades if he were his usual self, the kind of ace up our sleeve that we could put in play no matter the event.

Then, there was another concern.

"...Hirata-kun!"

As Hirata headed back to the dorm, Mii-chan chased after him. How many times had this scene played out already? Even though more and more people continued to give up on Hirata, Mii-chan still hadn't. Unfazed, she called out to Hirata yet again.

Was this what love could do to a person? No...even if it was love, I still had some doubts. She had to be afraid Hirata would come to hate her for pursuing him so persistently. But why did she keep doing it, then?

“It’s like, really hard to watch Hirata-kun when he’s like this...” said Kei quietly, speaking to her group of girlfriends, who had remained behind in the classroom.

“Yeah. Is it okay to just leave him alone like this, Karuizawa-san?”

“I don’t think it’ll make any difference even if I do say something to him, though. He’ll probably just resent me,” said Kei.

The way Hirata had completely shut Kei down when she reached out to him the other day was probably still fresh in everyone’s minds.

“Yeah. I mean, first Hirata-kun got dumped, and then Yamauchi-kun got kicked out, and...” said one of the girls.

I cast a sideways glance at the girls as they chatted, then left the classroom myself. All things considered, my goal today wasn’t Hirata. I was going to do some digging into how to deal with another thing that was worrying me. It involved another student who’d left the classroom after Mii-chan did.

“Hey, do you have a minute?” I asked, calling out to a girl. After a short pause, she turned around.

“What’s up, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked.

I had called out to none other than Kushida, who’d had no noteworthy input on this special exam so far. She wasn’t helping her classmates, but neither was she getting in anyone’s way, either. Instead, she was staying quiet, simply being part of the class.

Normally, Kushida would have taken something of a sub-leader position, supporting the rest of the class. This time, however, I saw no signs of that happening. There were probably two reasons for that. The first was probably because her position had been shaken during the last exam, the in-class voting. Even though you could say that she’d been used by Yamauchi, the fact that she was complicit in the attempt to get me expelled had come to light for all to see.

Many of our classmates seemed to have decided there was enough leeway there to be sympathetic to Kushida, but this still posed something of a problem for her. The incident had damaged the thing

she took such pride in: her reputation as a truly good person.

The other reason was because Horikita was playing the part of leader. This was probably the main reason why Kushida was behaving the way she was now. She'd disliked Horikita from the very beginning, because Horikita knew all about her past. And on top of that, Horikita had strongly reprimanded her during the class vote.

Whatever the reason, she'd been verbally attacked, blamed for trying to get someone unfairly expelled. That had to have been a death blow to her pride. Knowing this, I purposefully decided to talk to her anyway.

"I see you haven't really been supporting Horikita this time," I told her.

After all, I wanted to understand what Kushida was planning to do in this special exam. The smiling mask she usually wore made it impossible to guess her true feelings, no matter how hard you looked. You'd have to see her real self—the one that lay beneath the mask—to understand.

"Shall we walk and talk?" she asked.



“Sure.”

Not wanting our conversation to be overheard by anyone nearby, Kushida suggested we take a walk.

“Do you have any plans today?” I asked.

“Yes. I’m going to hang out a bit with some girls from Class B. Do you think it’s wrong of me to spend this precious time before our exam hanging out with friends?” she replied.

“No, you gotta take time to relax. I think everyone in our grade would agree with that,” I replied.

It would be silly to spend all of your time thinking solely about the exam, twenty-four hours a day. When it was time to focus, you should focus. When it was time to loosen up, you should loosen up.

“You understand, don’t you? The reason why I’m not doing anything? I helped Yamauchi-kun. I even thought it’d be fine if you got expelled, Ayanokouji-kun. Now, because that fact has come to light, how could I possibly be seen leading the rest of the class?” she said, touching on the subject herself.

She had purposefully not mentioned Horikita being the main reason.

“You’re making a face that says you’re not convinced,” she added.

“Well, I guess I’m not.”

“Let me just be clear about this. It’s not like I don’t want to help out just because Horikita-san is the leader. Okay?”

“Really?”

“Really, really.”

I nodded in response. She was lying, though.

“You don’t believe me,” said Kushida.

Well, of course I didn’t. But even though I wasn’t showing it on my face, Kushida had decided that was what I was thinking. She had already determined that I was suspicious of her.

“How do I look to you right now, Ayanokouji-kun? Give me your honest thoughts.”

“Well, I guess...”

On the outside, she looked like a classmate with a cute smile. However...

I tried to imagine what Kushida's true personality looked like, that she kept hidden underneath her mask.

"That bitch! I'm going to totally kill her! She humiliated me in front of everyone in class?! I'm never, ever letting that go! I'll kill her! Kill, kill, kill! I am going to completely destroy her!"

A vein throbbing in her temple, hurling insults and abuse at Horikita. Shouting a series of words that you couldn't bear to listen to.



“.....”

I couldn't begin to describe what I'd just pictured.

“You thought of something incredibly rude just now, didn't you?” she asked.

“No... Not at all,” I replied.

The extreme mental image had left me at a bit of a loss for words. I shook those thoughts out of my head and decided to cut right to the chase.

“If you can't help me out, then I'll do my best to honor your wishes as much as I can.”

“And in exchange, you want information... Right?” she replied.

Kushida was well aware of what this special exam meant.

“Exactly,” I answered.

“Is there no one else in class that you can rely on right now, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked.

Though her smile never faltered, I knew she wasn't going to agree to help me right off the bat. Even though we had a transactional relationship, Kushida was starting to grow intensely guarded once again. I suppose we were at the turning point where she'd finally determine whether I was an enemy or a friend.

“No one as much as you,” I replied.

“It's really nice of you to say that. But unfortunately, I have a lot going on right now.”

“A lot?”

“You're such a meanie, Ayanokouji-kun.”

The fact that her standing in class had been knocked down a few pegs was a huge setback for her. The character that Kushida Kikyou had spent a year building up had been tainted. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that she still had a lot of support from her classmates, but even so, no one was about to say exactly what they thought of her right now. They might have doubts, deep down. I suppose it just went to show how it was difficult to gain trust, but only took a moment to lose it. As was usually the case.

“All right, then let me turn the question around, then. How can I

get you to help me?" I asked.

"I think I have to ask you to give up on that for the time being. I'm just going to lay low, spending my time in class peacefully, until I can feel like myself again. Is that too much to ask?" she replied.

She was basically saying that she wasn't going to help me, but she wasn't going to get in my way, either. I supposed this also meant that if she were volunteered for an event, she'd put in the bare minimum required to succeed.

"Are you fine with doing that? Not just for me, but for Horikita, too?" I asked.

"I suppose you could interpret it that way. I've come to realize that this school is a far more comfortable place for me, personally, than I'd initially thought."

She continued acting the part she wanted to play, all while continuing to wear her mask. I supposed presenting me with a favorable option was part of her strategy. It was a shame I couldn't gain her cooperation, but it was probably best I just graciously accept what she was offering.

"All right. Sorry for asking something unreasonable of you."

"No, no, it's all right. It honestly makes me happy that you wanted to come to me."

Once we reached the school entrance, Kushida and I parted ways. She headed toward the Keyaki Mall without stopping even once.

6.4

THE WEEKEND WAS OVER and before any of us knew it, it was Sunday, March 14th. White Day. To be completely honest, I was grateful it had fallen on a Sunday. I'd prepared a few gifts, laying them out on my desk. If White Day had fallen on a regular weekday, I would have had a hard time figuring out when to hand them over. In the morning before class? Or after class? I had a lot to consider, such as the order in which I would give the gifts out, and what to do about students in other classes.

More importantly, it wouldn't be good for my image if people saw what I was doing. I understood it would be best if I just handed the gifts over without worrying about getting stares from people nearby, but I couldn't *not* worry about it. However, since we had the day off, I could simply drop them off in their respective mailboxes.

I left my room early to avoid running into anyone and headed toward the dormitory mailboxes.

"Let's see..." I mumbled quietly to myself, while placing gifts in the mailboxes of each student who had given me chocolate on Valentine's Day.

All right, that's all the chocolate. Guess I ought to head on back, I thought to myself. Just as I was thinking that, though, I bumped into Ichinose. She reacted as though she had just seen something she shouldn't have.

"G-good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"H-hey, morning."

It wasn't even 7 a.m. yet, and I'd just had a surprising encounter. Just like the last time we met, Ichinose seemed to be avoiding making eye contact with me today, too.

"I happened to wake up kind of early today. I just got back from a walk," she told me.

It seemed like she was looking at me when she spoke, but it was more like she was looking slightly away from me. She was probably planning to check her mailbox before heading back to her room.

“Oh, uh, excuse me,” I said, motioning her through.

I made way for her, so that she could see her mailbox. Ichinose responded with a grateful bow, and then checked the contents of her mailbox. When she did...she discovered the gift that I had placed there, of course.

“I’m sure you can already tell just by looking at it. But it’s, well, a return gift,” I told her.

Having removed the gift from her mailbox, she simply stood there with the box in her hands, unmoving, like she was frozen solid.

“But you didn’t have to, I mean, a gift like this...” she stammered, apparently now having remembered how to speak after struggling for a bit.

“Oh, no, no, I had to.”

“...Th-thank you. And, um, I’m sorry. I guess I’m not really used to this kind of thing, so I’m kind of nervous.”

I felt the same way. I’d delivered the gifts early in the morning because I didn’t want to run into anyone, meaning I was feeling pretty flustered right now. This was beginning to get awkward, so I tried to change the subject.

“...Oh, hey, that reminds me. What happened after that whole incident on Thursday that we talked about? You know, the thing with Shibata?” I asked.

“Oh, um, well... Were you worried?” she asked.

“A little, yeah.”

Ichinose must have found it easier to talk now that I’d changed the subject, since things felt more like they normally did between us.

“Well, right after it happened, I interviewed everyone. But the only victims we heard about were the three people that Shibata-kun had mentioned. But, well...”

“But?”

“On Friday, it seemed like the number of victims just suddenly shot up. Three girls and three more boys. Just yesterday, I got reports that they were being followed around and harassed in the same way,” said Shibata.

Meaning there was a total of nine victims now. So, Class D limited

their harassment to just three people for the three days after the exam was first announced, only to suddenly up their game and harass six more people on Friday?

“Do you know which students from Class D have been doing the stalking?” I asked.

Ichinose nodded and then proceeded to list some names. “As far as I know, it’s Ishizaki-kun, Komiya-kun, Yamada-kun, Kondou-kun, Ibukisan, and Kinoshita-san.”

A total of six people, huh? Students who were willing to get their hands dirty, to an extent. They didn’t seem to be conducting their business in secret or anything, because Ichinose had managed to put names to faces so easily.

“I wonder if those six are just planning to just randomly follow whoever they happen to bump into?” said Ichinose.

Many of the people in Class D were entirely ordinary students, so I supposed it was only natural to think so.

“I plan on doing some more interviews on Monday,” said Ichinose.

“What are you going to do if the damage ends up being as extensive as you’re imagining it will be?” I asked. It was possible even Ichinose and Kanzaki might get dragged into it, eventually.

“Hmm. Well, I suppose there’s nothing I really can do. It’s not like they’ve actually gotten violent or anything... So I think we’ve decided to just put up with it until they actually end up causing some real harm. We’re planning to provide emotional support to the affected students, though, to ensure their well-being.”

From the sound of it, they were ready to take action at a moment’s notice if someone really got hurt.

“I see.”

Class D was acting strangely. I had to wonder if they really planned to go after every student in Class B. With only six students actually doing the harassing, it wasn’t like they were putting the screws to them *that* hard. Even if they kept going, when all was said and done, their behavior amounted to simple harassment and nothing more.

I supposed it was possible Ishizaki simply didn’t think that far ahead when he came up with this strategy. Or perhaps Class D was fine with the plan as long as they thought it inflicted at least a little bit of

psychological damage?

“Do you think I’m handling this the wrong way?” Ichinose must have noticed that I was lost in thought, because she looked up at me with a somewhat anxious expression.

“No... I think what you’re doing is good. In fact, Class D probably wouldn’t be punished even if you did complain to the school. And if you went to the school, you’d probably be doing exactly what they wanted.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” said Ichinose.

What she needed to do was make sure that what Class D was actually after was what she thought it was. That being said, Ichinose didn’t seem like she intended to make a move, so telling her as much might be superfluous. Besides, if her way of doing things was to focus on a policy of nonaggressive self-defense, it was wrong of me to suggest anything else.

“Have you settled on your ten events?” I asked.

“Yep. We got to know each other’s strengths and weaknesses pretty early on. We finalized our list yesterday, mixing in some events that we thought Class D might have a hard time with, too. What about you, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked.

“Oh, I haven’t gotten involved in anything this time around. I’ve been leaving everything to do with the ten events to Horikita.”

“But what about the ways in which the commander can get involved?” she asked.

“I left that part to Horikita, too.”

Ichinose was surprised. She must not have expected me to be so casual about my role as commander.

“Well, it sounds like you have quite a lot of faith in Horikita-san. Or maybe...you’re saying that you can handle any kind of event, or any kinds of rules, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s the former, one hundred percent. Unlike you, I only have a few classmates that I’m pretty close to, so I honestly don’t know much about most people. I just volunteered to become the commander so I could prevent anyone from getting expelled is all,” I told her.

“But why did you want to go up against Class A, then?” she asked.

“That was Horikita’s idea, too. Maybe she thought we’d have a

chance of winning or something.”

“I see,” replied Ichinose, not pressing the matter any further.

With that, our conversation was over, so we both just waited for the elevator to come.

“Ah... I was so not prepared for this...” said Ichinose, muttering to herself quietly. She sounded like she’d just remembered something. As she stood next to me, she twirled her hair with her index finger.

“Prepared?” I asked.

“O-Oh, it’s nothing, don’t worry about it.”

We got on the elevator and soon arrived at the fourth floor, where my room was located.

“Well, see ya later.”

As I got off the elevator, my eyes met Ichinose’s for just a moment, seeming to catch her off guard.

“Y-Y-Y-Yeah! S-See you, later!” she stammered.

Suddenly panicked, she hit the button to close the doors repeatedly. The doors closed moments after, hiding her from view. That sure was a strange way of saying goodbye. I supposed just making it through this White Day ordeal was good enough.

“Come to think of it, I didn’t catch a whiff of that citrus scent today,” I mused to myself.

Well, it was early in the morning on a holiday. There was no reason for her to go out with perfume on.

IT WAS MONDAY MORNING—the day our opponent’s ten events would be announced. What kinds of events and rules would Class A come up with? And what kind of involvement would the commander have?

While on my way to school, I just so happened to bump into Horikita’s brother and Tachibana. It didn’t seem like they were waiting for me. If anything, it really seemed to just be a coincidence this time.

Tachibana didn’t really say anything in particular, but quietly took a step back. Perhaps that was a show of consideration, saying that she wouldn’t get in the way of our conversation when the two of us started talking. Her responses to situations were quick and polite. I was sure she’d been a constant source of support for Horikita’s brother while they were on the student council.

“Is the special exam proceeding well?” he asked.

I really had to hand it to him. He seemed to already have an understanding of the situation, without requiring any explanation from me.

“I thought that’s what I should be asking you. Are you going to be able to graduate from Class A?” I asked.

“Don’t know. I suppose that depends on the results we see next week.”

I couldn’t tell if he was totally okay, or if he was worried.

“Well, I can say your little sister really has been giving it her best effort. It seems you’ve had more of an effect on her than I thought,” I told him.

“That so?”

Horikita was incredibly full of energy right now. It was almost like she’d found and downed some magic elixir. In Hirata’s absence, she had taken the lead and brought the class together. And now, she was actively spending each day polishing our strategies so that we could win all ten events.

“Shouldn’t the third-years normally be on vacation around this

time?" I asked.

"That's right. I was surprised to find that out, too, after I enrolled here. This is the time of year when most high schools would already be on vacation, yes. But of course, the third-years are making favorable progress toward proceeding onto higher education or gaining employment. Things are in motion. You're just not aware of it."

From the sounds of it, the third-years had quite a lot to deal with between the special exams.

"Wait. People are going on to higher education and finding jobs even though it hasn't been decided whether or not you're graduating from Class A?" I asked.

"You'll understand eventually," he replied, leaving it at that. He didn't give me an in-depth answer.

I supposed some things just couldn't be revealed to the current students. From the sound of it, we'd have to wait until just before graduation to find out if being a Class A student was even worth it.

"If there's anything you'd like to ask me about, feel free to do so. If it's within the scope of things I can answer, I will."

"It seems the scope of what you can tell me about is pretty narrow, though."

When he heard my somewhat sarcastic remark, the corners of his mouth curved upward into a slight smile.

"Well, you might be right about that. Think of it as the ties of obligation that come from being the former student council president," he answered.

I supposed that he couldn't just casually talk about issues that affected the entire school.

"Well, now that I've bumped into you, this is a good opportunity. There's something I've been wondering about for a while now."

I decided to make use of this coincidence to ask Horikita's brother a question.

"It's about Horikita... I mean, your little sister. I think she's excellent. Neither her academic nor athletic abilities miss the mark. While I don't think anyone would say she's the best of the best, she's had the talent to be the second- or third-best since the day she enrolled

at this school. She might not be as good as you, someone who made it onto the student council, but I can't imagine her being lacking enough that you'd want to disparage or drive her away."

There was something else that seemed out of place to me. More than anything else.

"In the first place, besides, you and your sister have a two-year age gap. Meaning you haven't seen the last two years of her growth. And with the school's system being what it is, there's no way you'd be able to tell at a glance just how much she's grown," I told him.

Horikita Manabu hadn't seen his little sister ever since she was in her second or third year of junior high. Even if he knew the kind of grades she was getting when she started here, I couldn't imagine that being enough to make him this dissatisfied with her. But when I saw Horikita Manabu meet with his little sister outside the dorm a while ago, his behavior had been a far cry from what I'd call calm.

"I see. It's understandable you'd find it strange, after seeing what happened then."

That, I'd just remembered, was also the first time I came into contact with Horikita's brother.

"I wasn't disappointed in Suzune because of something superficial, like her grades. I was disappointed in her growth as a person. In her character."

"Her character?"

"A long time ago, Suzune used to be completely different from how she is now. She was the kind of child who smiled a lot," said Manabu.

Wait, *she* smiled a lot?

...It was useless. I honestly couldn't picture it.

"So, you're saying she's pretending to be this cool, detached person because of your influence?" I asked.

"Because she's been trying to imitate me in every single way. A bad habit that started to show when she was in elementary school. But, now that I think about it, it was my fault for neglecting her. For many years, I thought I could make her better by treating her coldly, but in reality, it just had the opposite effect," said Manabu.

As a result, Horikita kept chasing her brother's shadow, leading to her becoming the person she was today.

"So, even though you look completely flawless from the outside, you failed to set up a proper dialogue with your little sister?" I asked.

"No one is perfect. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're right about that." I couldn't argue that point. "So basically, reuniting with her at this school and having that one conversation was enough to make you understand how things stood?"

To be honest, it didn't seem like they'd even had a long conversation.

"I knew the moment I saw her. Before we even spoke. I understood that Suzune hadn't changed at all, these past two years," said Manabu.

I wondered if he'd seen something that only an older brother could understand.

He continued speaking.

"She hung on every word I ever said. Go study. Exercise. Don't do this. Don't do that. Honestly, it would've been fine if she'd just stopped there...but she didn't. She even copied other things. What I liked to eat, what I liked to drink. My taste in clothing and the colors I liked to wear. She was completely and utterly dependent on me."

The fact that she'd taken things that far was honestly kind of terrifying. Still, thinking back to how Horikita acted when she first enrolled here, it made sense.

"So after being reunited with your little sister here, you sensed that she was still completely dependent on you?" I asked.

Unless he was psychic, that was still far too little information for him to assess everything she'd gone through in that two-year gap.

"That's right. Anyone who knew Suzune back when she was little could tell just by looking at her. She..."

Manabu stopped speaking mid-sentence.

"...No, this is probably something I should keep secret, even from you. I'd like to use it as my final metric to determine whether or not Suzune has really changed."

"I guess it means it hasn't happened yet."

He nodded. While she'd made a great deal of progress since the year started, based on what her brother was saying, it apparently still wasn't enough.

"She's been trying her hardest to break free of the curse of her past, but she's still only halfway there."

I wondered if Horikita would be able to satisfy this final metric of her brother's before he graduated. The graduation ceremony was in less than ten days.

"But, if..." said Manabu, his words trailing off.

He stopped speaking and looked at me. For some reason, I stopped walking, finding myself trapped by his powerful gaze.

"If Suzune can stop chasing after this illusion she has of me, break her dependence on me, and confront herself honestly, then..."

A gust of spring wind blew past us.

"She will probably surpass me and become someone even you can't ignore," said Manabu.

Horikita Manabu wasn't some idiotic, doting brother who fawned over his sister. He meant what he said. I was also impressed by the height of the potential that Horikita had, in many ways. Why, though? Was it because of what her brother said to me?

Suddenly, a thought crossed my mind.

What was I supposed to do here at this school? No...rather, what did I *want* to do? I suddenly felt like I understood.

"That's only...if she can make the change herself, though."

"She will change, though," I told him. "Wait, let me rephrase that."

I amended my statement.

"I'm going to try and change her. Not just expecting her to change, somehow, like I've been doing so far. But taking things seriously."

"...Oh ho. I never thought you'd say something like that."

I'd bumped into Horikita's brother on accident, but our conversation would have a huge impact on my life. It would be a long, long time before I knew whether or not my hunch was right.

“Hey, can I ask you just one more thing, before you graduate? It’s a completely personal question.” I didn’t know if we’d have the chance to talk like this in the future.

“What is it?”

“Are you and Tachibana going out?”

I was well aware that it was a silly question, but I wanted to ask anyway. Even though they had left the student council, the two of them were often doing things together.

“No, that is not the case at all,” he replied, denying it straight out.

It didn’t seem like he was lying or trying to hide anything. However, a quick sideways glance at Tachibana’s face told me the situation was complicated. At the very least, I had no doubt that she had a certain kind of fondness for Horikita’s brother.

“I’ve spent the last three years thinking about nothing but school, for better or worse,” he added.

“Huh, okay.”

“But I have to say, I never thought I’d hear a question like that from you. Maybe you’re a normal high-schooler, after all?”

Maybe I’d been influenced by that chat I had with Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“I think I’m the kind of high schooler who is as closest to normal as possible.”

“I see. Well, then, Mr. Regular High School Kid, have you gotten yourself a girlfriend?” he asked.

Even though I’d been the one to bring up this topic, I hadn’t expected it to be turned on me.

“Not right now, no. But if someone comes along, I think I’m open to putting myself out there,” I told him.

“I feel like I could rest easy if I left Suzune to you. But I can’t really see that happening at all,” said Manabu.

“Yeah, definitely not.”

There was no way.

“Th-that’s not good. You do realize saying something like that pretty much jinxes you to make sure it happens, right?” Tachibana,

flustered, suddenly cut into our conversation after having stood by listening quietly until now.

“Jinxing himself?” asked Manabu.

“Oh, uh, well, I guess you could say it’s like, a rule that things do the opposite of what you say,” Tachibana hurriedly explained. “Like dramatic irony or something... It’s not entirely uncommon for two people who thought they’d never end up getting together to *actually* get together. That sort of thing.”

Horikita Manabu and I exchanged looks, neither of us understanding her explanation in the slightest.

“N-Never mind, just forget about it,” Tachibana stammered, apparently giving up on getting her point across and deciding to leave it at that.

6.6

BACK IN THE CLASSROOM, homeroom was already over. At the same time, the ten events chosen by our opponent, Class A, had just been announced via documents left for us in our classroom, which Horikita read aloud for everyone to hear. The events were listed in order by the number of people needed for the event.

Chess

Required Participants: 1 Person

Allotted Time: 1 Hour (Going over time results in a loss)

Rules: Standard chess rules apply. However, the allotted time will not increase, even after the forty-first move.

Commander: The commander can give instructions to their respective player for up to a maximum of thirty minutes at any time. Time spent by the commander in this way will use up the allotted time.

Flash Mental Arithmetic

Required Participants: 2 Persons

Allotted Time: 30 Minutes

Rules: Victory will be awarded to the class of the student who places first in terms of both accuracy and speed, using abacus-style mental arithmetic.

Commander: The commander can change the answer for just one question of their choosing.

Go

Required Participants: 3 Persons

Allotted Duration: 1 Hour (Going over time results in a loss)

Rules: Three one-on-one games will be played simultaneously. Standard go rules apply.

Commander: The commander is allowed to provide advice for one single move, at any time.

Contemporary Literature Test

Required Participants: 4 Persons

Allotted Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: Students will answer a set of questions within the scope of what they would find in the first-year curriculum. The winner will be decided based on total points.

Commander: The commander can answer one single question on behalf of a participant.

Social Studies Test

Required Participants: 5 Persons

Allotted Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: Students will answer a set of questions within the scope of what they would find in the first-year curriculum for geography, history, and civics. The winner will be decided based on total points.

Commander: The commander can answer one single question on behalf of a participant.

Volleyball

Required Participants: 6 Persons

Allotted Time: First to 10 Points or Best of 3 Sets

Rules: Standard volleyball rules apply.

Commander: The commander can switch three players at any time.

Mathematics Test

Required Participants: 7 Persons

Allotted Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: Students will solve a set of problems within the scope of what they would find in the first-year curriculum. The winner will be decided based on total points.

Commander: The commander can answer one single question on behalf of a participant.

English Test

Required Participants: 8 Persons

Allotted Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: Students will answer a set of questions within the scope of what they would find in the first-year curriculum. The winner will be

decided based on total points.

Commander: The commander can answer one single question on behalf of a participant.

XL Jump Rope

Required Participants: 20 Persons

Allotted Time: 30 Minutes

Rules: The class that can successfully jump the most times in two rounds wins.

Commander: The commander can change the order of the opposing team's lineup however they wish, one time.

Dodgeball

Required Participants: 18 Persons

Allotted Time: 10 Minutes Per Set, for 2 Sets

Rules: Standard dodgeball rules apply. In the event of a tie, a sudden death round will be held.

Commander: The commander can return one player who had been taken out of the game and put them back into play on the court, at any time of their choosing.

"They included more sport events than I had expected. I'd expected these to all be written exams and tests of intellect. That being said, there's a good chance that some of these events are meant to fake us out," said Horikita.

Such were her first impressions. Keisei spoke up, apparently sharing her opinion.

"Chess and Go are both well-known games, but it doesn't seem many students have actually played them. So, I feel like those put us in a bit of a tight spot. Also, the sports they chose all involve a great deal of teamwork," he said.

There was probably no one in class who hadn't heard of chess or Go—but also probably not a lot of people who'd actually played them.

"I have to say, I didn't expect such a minimal level of involvement for the commander. Though I mostly welcome that. Especially in the academic-focused events, where their intervention wouldn't have much of an effect on the outcome."

“That probably just speaks to how confident they are in their abilities, though. Not only is Class A particularly skilled when it comes to academics, but they picked four events where that’s the focus. And the required number of participants is high. That’s pretty rough for us...”

Class A had always taken the top spot in every test in terms of overall performance. The large number of required participants for each of these events was probably a testament to their confidence. Add to that the fact that the commander couldn’t do much, and it made this their way of essentially forcing us into a pure showdown of academics.

Also, the fact that they hadn’t gone solely with written exams for their submissions was the right move on their part. If they put forward seven or eight written exams, we could’ve shifted our attention solely toward studying. I was guessing they were probably trying to limit our ability to compete with them, while still setting up subjects for us to study that might just get tossed out later.

“There are six players in volleyball. Nine if you include the substitutes. For dodgeball, that’s eighteen players. The XL jump rope requires a maximum of twenty people. These events require so many people that we could easily end up having to make students compete a second time if any of them get chosen.”

Since we didn’t know which of the ten events would be adopted for now, we couldn’t afford to slack off in any way. Moreover, since many of the sports events required a large number of people, we’d need to invest a great deal of time and effort into assigning participants to those events and practicing for them. We couldn’t just boldly rent out the gym or something to practice, either—Class A would catch wind of what we were doing. Which meant we had to practice in secret.

However, the fact remained that we didn’t know which of these were their official events. Even if we spent a great deal of time practicing, all of our hard work could be for nothing if the events we prepared for didn’t get chosen. It’d just be a waste of our time. On the other hand, if we assumed an event was there just to fake us out and didn’t practice for it, that lack of practice would be painfully obvious on the day of the exam. There was no way for us to win.

While it was important for us to find out what Class A was doing this week, that information was going to be hard to obtain if they practiced early in the morning or late at night. It was possible they

might split up and practice in small groups, too.

We couldn't afford to slack off for any of these ten events. No matter which ones got picked, they all spelled trouble. Not that there were ever going to be any events we'd be *happy* to participate in, I supposed.

"Does anyone here have experience playing chess or Go?" asked Horikita, asking for a show of hands.

Only Miyamoto raised his hand.

"I've played go a few times with my family, but I'm not really good enough to recite the rules from memory or anything," he said aloud.

From the looks of it, chess and Go were both lost causes for us, right off the bat. After a slight delay, I raised my hand, too.

"I know how to play chess, more or less. But I know nothing about Go. I've never played it before," I announced.

Although I was the commander, I figured it would be a good idea to let everyone know that I could teach people the rules for chess.

"Well, I suppose it's a relief that we have some people familiar with the games here. Still, I have to say, this really is quite a ridiculous test. We absolutely cannot afford to not take any of these ten events seriously," said Horikita.

How much could someone even master chess or Go in less than a week? If luck was skewed in our opponent's favor, then only two of our events and five of theirs would be chosen. We had no choice but to rely on our classmates' skills for parts of this exam.

But why...?

"What's the matter, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Horikita, peering at my face with a puzzled look.

"...Nothing."

The degree to which the commanders could get involved in the chess match was *huge*. It was almost like the match was actually between the commanders. I got a feeling Sakayanagi strongly desired to fight me directly through that event.

"Hey, Horikita. Shouldn't we be launching a full-scale information war of our own at this point?" said Keisei, sounding impatient about

something.

“You mean doing some investigating to...find out which of these Class A will choose as their official events, right?” replied Horikita.

“Yes. To be completely honest, it’s going to be fairly difficult for us to try and prepare for all ten events in the time we have left. If we don’t get our hands on some kind of intel, then our chances of winning get that much slimmer,” he argued.

“But it’s not like Class A is just going to give up information that easily,” said another boy, stating something that pretty much everyone in class already understood.

“Even so, we have to try.”

“I understand how you feel. But I can’t make a decision about that right now. First, let me get an idea of how many people here have some experience with each of the events.”

Shelving the idea of gathering information for later, Horikita began by focusing on understanding all ten of the events on the list.

“**H**ORIKITA, could I have a minute?” asked Keisei, during the break.

“Sure, not a problem. What is it?”

“Well, probably shouldn’t talk about it right here... It’s about the special exam.”

Keisei quietly urged Horikita to step out into the hall, not wanting others to hear their conversation. I had intended to just watch them go, but Horikita shot me a look.

“Do you mind if Ayanokouji-kun accompanies us?”

“...No, I don’t mind.”

While Keisei didn’t seem thrilled by the idea, he agreed. I wasn’t going to turn down the offer, so I followed the two of them out into the hallway.

“Have you given any thought to what I said?” he asked.

“About gathering information?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah, I see... Well, I can’t imagine it’s going to be that simple for us to get information on Class A,” said Horikita.

“But it’d be a waste not to try. We should be using our time effectively,” said Keisei.

He seemed to want to start both gathering information and taking action as soon as possible. The desire to exhaust every possible option in pursuit of victory was something I understood quite well.

“Do you think we’ll figure something out if we just stick close to the students from Class A?”

“I suppose not. It’s doubtful whether the average Class A student will know which of the ten events are going to be their official five.”

It was possible that only Sakayanagi knew. Or that she’d only told those closest to her. It wouldn’t be unusual for someone like her to strictly control the flow of information.

“Even if Sakayanagi is the only one who knows what their five official events are, her classmates should have at least some idea of what’s going on, right? You agree with me, right, Kiyotaka?” said Keisei.

“Well, I suppose her classmates would probably know something, yeah.”

Since the students of Class A had been together for about a year now, I was sure they knew each other’s strengths and weaknesses, to a certain extent. They could at least hazard a guess as to which events they thought would be chosen.

“Right. So, I’ve come up with a way to get information from Class A,” said Keisei.

“And what would that be?” asked Horikita.

“We’ll bring Katsuragi over to our side. Make him an ally of Class C,” said Keisei, speaking in a low voice, making sure no one else was around to hear.

Katsuragi. The former leader of Class A and the one who stood in opposition to Sakayanagi.

“Totsuka, someone who followed Katsuragi, ended up being expelled because of Sakayanagi. Don’t you think Katsuragi would hold a grudge over that? I’ve passed him several times over the last few days. He’s clearly not the same person he was before.”

There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that he held a grudge against Sakayanagi. I remembered the conversation that had taken place between Katsuragi and Ryuen on the day Yahiko was expelled.

“Do you think he’d betray his class just to frustrate Sakayanagi-san and screw up her plans?” asked Horikita.

“Well, we’d probably need a good bargaining chip, of course.”

Apparently, Keisei had already considered that.

“If he helps Class C attain victory, even if we end up winning four events and losing three, we’d still make out with one hundred and thirty class points. If you think about the class as a whole, that comes out to six million Private Points a year. If we set aside some points every month, it wouldn’t be impossible to accumulate close to twenty million,” reasoned Keisei.

Having heard all that, I could see what Keisei was trying to get at.

“Then, when we reach Class A, we propose granting Katsuragi the right to transfer into our class. What do you think about that condition? Besides, by doing things this way, we make him an ally,” said Keisei.

“First of all, there’s no way an ordinary student would accept a deal like this. No matter what we try to say to him, you do realize we’re still just Class C?” said Horikita.

“But considering the situation Katsuragi is currently in, can you really say for sure he wouldn’t go for it?” argued Keisei.

“While it may be true that Katsuragi feels like he doesn’t have a place in his class right now, if his classmates find out he betrayed them, he’ll definitely be the next student to get expelled. He can’t afford to sit pretty while we save up twenty million points. Even if we assume our class points will continue to steadily accumulate, and even if our entire class cooperates fully, it will probably take at least six months or more, at best,” I replied matter-of-factly.

If we wanted to save the twenty million without straining ourselves, we should realistically expect it to take more like a year. On top of that, even though we’d be getting class points, twenty million points was by no means a small price to pay.

“What do you think, Horikita?” I asked.

“...Well, just as you’ve said Yukimura-kun, it is extremely important that we get our hands on some information,” said Horikita.

“In that case—” said Keisei, but she cut him off.

“However, regarding your proposal, I cannot say that I can agree with it.”

“Wh-why not?” stammered Keisei.

“It’s true Katsuragi-kun is being backed into a corner. That said, I can’t imagine he’d accept these conditions to betray his class. Our bargaining chip isn’t nearly appealing enough,” said Horikita.

It’d be a different story if we could give him the points right away, but the fact that it’d probably be more than a year made it pretty doubtful that he’d go along with this.

“But if we don’t make a move, we’re not going to get any information,” said Keisei.

"I find it difficult to imagine we'll get any information even if we *do* make a move," countered Horikita.

"How can you know for sure if you don't even try?" argued Keisei.

He was persistent, but Horikita refused to budge.

"I'm not shooting down the idea of gathering information, in and of itself. However, this plan of yours is simply no good. If you come up with another idea, come talk to me again," said Horikita.

She ended the conversation there, and returned to the classroom.

"Damn it!" shouted Keisei, kicking the wall as a show of frustration. "...Hey Kiyotaka, will you help me out?"

"Convincing Horikita?" I asked in return.

"No... Help me convince Katsuragi. Just the two of us."

That was a bold request.

"I wouldn't say Horikita has given up on winning. But I get the feeling that deep down, she doesn't feel like we're a match for Class A. You know? I mean, if she wasn't, then she ought to at least give this a try. Even if people find out that we made contact with Katsuragi, it's not like that puts Class C at a disadvantage," he added.

The way things were going, even if I told Keisei I disagreed with his idea, it probably wouldn't stop him from going off on his own. I might be able to figure out a lot more about the situation if I tagged along.

"Okay. How are we going to get in touch with Katsuragi, though?" I asked.

"That's... I'll have to think about it. There's still some time before the exam."

"All right. Let me know what you decide, then."

I'd agreed to Keisei's idea just to stop him from acting on his own. And for the time being, I decided to cooperate with him.

“HHEY. IF IT’S all right with you, can we talk for a little while now?”

It was a little past six o’clock in the evening, just before dinner. Horikita had asked me that question just as I was watching the burner heat up a pot. The water came to a boil, bubbling excitedly.

“Were you just in the middle of making dinner?” she asked.

“Yeah, but don’t worry about it.” All I had done so far was boil some water. I hadn’t really gotten started yet. “So, you wanted to talk? What about?”

If she was planning to request I help her come up with events, then I was going to refuse.

“Don’t worry. I’m not asking you to decide what events we’re going with. I promise you that,” she told me,

apparently having guessed what I was thinking. “But, if it’s okay with you, I’d prefer we meet in person to talk. It should only take about an hour. That’s all.”

Was it something difficult to talk about over the phone? Or maybe there was something she wanted to ascertain by meeting face-to-face? Well, an hour wasn’t that long. I wasn’t going to turn her down.

“All right. Are you coming here?” I asked.

“While I’m fine with that, you’ve been in the middle of a lot of controversy lately. How about my room?” she replied.

She seemed to be wary of the possibility of an unexpected visitor. Well, I had gone to Horikita’s room before. There wasn’t really any particular reason for me to refuse her.

I turned off the burner, grabbed only my phone, and left my room. Then, I got onto the elevator and headed toward Horikita’s room. The sun was already down, but it was still actually pretty early in the evening, so it wasn’t a surprise to see boys walking around the upper floors, which was the girls’ area.

SHORTLY AFTER RINGING Horikita's doorbell, I heard the sound of her door being unlocked. I expected her to greet me with her usual serious look, but got a surprise when she opened the door.

"Welcome," she said.

Surprisingly, she didn't look in a bad mood. I, on the other hand, I felt a little uneasy at this surprising change. The scent of miso faintly wafted from further inside her room.

"I was just preparing dinner. Come in," said Horikita.

If she was in the middle of making her dinner, she could've just called me later...

When I hesitated to enter, Horikita gave me a look, urging me to get a move on, so I decided to come in. Maybe she'd been reluctant to have me over later at night, or something like that. I figured I'd just leave it at that and not overthink things. But as soon as I set foot inside her room, I noticed something strange.

For some reason, places had been set for two people at her small table. I wondered if she was going to have dinner with someone after we were done talking?

"Well then..."

Just as I was about to try confirm her plans were, Horikita interrupted me.

"Please, don't be shy. Have a seat."

Wait. Hold on a second...

There was clearly a pair of chopsticks placed on the table at the spot she motioned me to sit at. My instincts were telling me this was a trap designed to force me into doing something.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Rather than sit down, I tried to start the conversation immediately.

"Are you going to stand and talk? I still have some stuff to finish up, so could you please sit down and wait for me?"

"Well... I just feel like I want to stand."

“You feel like what now? Having you just stand there makes me uncomfortable. Sit.”

Her tone was growing harsher, so I decided to sit. It had been a surprisingly long time since I’d been subjected to her usual forceful, pushy and unreasonable attitude. Maybe I’d forgotten how Horikita typically behaved because I was starting to distance myself from her. And she was distancing herself from me.

At any rate, I figured I should probably just sit down and wait quietly. However, a quick glance showed me that dinner was still a work in progress. It seemed it would be quite some time before she was done cooking.

“Hey, you did say this would take an hour, right?” I asked.

“Yes. The conversation itself shouldn’t take more than an hour,” said Horikita, speaking with her back turned to me.

I couldn’t help but pick up on the way she worded that. It was certainly true that, when we spoke on the phone, she said the conversation would be over in an hour. Meaning anything *outside* the actual conversation didn’t count toward that estimate.

“Okay, and how long with everything else?” I asked.

“Let’s see... I’d say we’ll be done in about an hour and a half to two hours or so,” she replied.

I knew it.

“Considering what time it is, I thought that I’d at least offer you dinner,” she added.

No one wanted this. I felt like I was at the mercy of her absurd word games. That being said, I could see she’d already started cooking, and I didn’t really feel comfortable outright refusing to eat and then returning to my room. She had skillfully lured me into coming here.

Even though she had her back turned to me, I could see that Horikita’s cooking skills weren’t bad. If anything, she was fairly good for a first-year high school student.

“Both of my parents worked, so I was often put in charge of making dinner,” muttered Horikita, as if she understood what I was thinking just from my gaze.

“You don’t think it’s a hassle or time-consuming?” I asked. While

cooking could be fun, there were more than a few annoying aspects to the process.

“When I found out that oniichan got accepted into this school, I took the opportunity to cook more often.”

“In anticipation of coming to this school yourself and living on your own, I’m guessing?” I asked.

“Correct.”

Chop. She got done chopping something with her kitchen knife and then moved to finish the miso soup.

I wondered what she wanted to talk about, if we weren’t discussing the special exam? It was the only thing I couldn’t figure out yet.

ABOUT FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Horikita had finished cooking and set out everything on the table. Everything looked better than I had expected. It was the kind of spread that you would sometimes see on TV shows.

Horikita sat down across the table from me. If Sudou were to see this, he'd probably fly into a rage and punch my lights out. Even if I told him it was all a misunderstanding, he probably wouldn't listen. I hoped he'd had already been treated to a feast like this himself...but, well, even if he had, he'd probably still feel jealous anyway.

"Eat," ordered Horikita.

In response to her demand, I picked up the chopsticks. The two of us sat facing each other, with the food between us. For some reason, this situation made me feel a strong sense of déjà vu. It reminded me of the time back when we first started school, when Horikita got me a meal from the school cafeteria and then used me.

"Do you feel suspicious of me?" she asked.

"Well, to be honest, I can't help but feel uncomfortable about all this," I told her.

"If you start to doubt the kindness of others, that's proof that you have issues, as a person."

"That, coming from you?"

"Today is special," she answered.

"....."

Well, if she'd made this out of consideration for me, it would rude of me to not even touch it. But it was in my nature to be doubtful. Well, no...rather, it was everything I'd experienced that taught me to be suspicious.

Still, I'd been completely trapped by her. The outcome of this little game had been decided the minute I carelessly set foot in her room.

For the time being, I decided to try the soup. The smell of miso tickled my nose. She seemed to use particularly healthy ingredients, with daikon radish being the main one.

“Barley miso, huh?” Its characteristic intensely sweet flavor spread throughout my mouth when I took a sip of the soup.

“You know your stuff. It’s a type of miso that people prefer in Kyushu, but I wasn’t sure if it’d be to your liking,” she replied.

“You’re a good cook.” I tried giving her a genuine compliment, but she didn’t look particularly pleased.

“You don’t need any particularly special skills to be able to cook, nowadays. It’s nothing to be proud of. If there’s something you want to make, all you have to do is go buy stuff at the supermarket or convenience store and then look up the recipe online. Right?”

Sure, it was easy to just throw *something* together. But you could still show off your skills in lots of other ways, like how you arranged everything on the plate or how you cut up the vegetables. Those weren’t exactly skills you could learn overnight.

“Have you been cooking for Sudou like this, too?” I asked.

She shot me a somewhat disgruntled look. “Why should I have to feed him my cooking?” she snapped.

“Well... you’ve been tutoring him pretty often.”

“That’s right. But that being said, that has nothing to do with me cooking for him, does it?” she answered.

I thought it was just a trivial question, but Horikita continued to assail me with her objections.

“Now, if *he* were the one tutoring me, then I suppose I could understand your question. It would make sense, as an act undertaken to show thanks for everything that he had done. But considering that I’m the one doing the tutoring, there’s no way I’d go to the trouble of doing all that for him,” said Horikita.

It was such impressive logic that I was entirely at a loss for words, but...

“I can’t tell if you’re clever or if you’re stupid,” she added.

Honestly, she took the words right out of my mouth. Sudou had a crush on Horikita, and because of that, I thought she might have cooked for him sometime. But it seemed she had yet to come to terms with Sudou’s affection, probably because she didn’t place much importance on things like love. She hadn’t matured to the point where she could

even really be aware of such things.

“Well, then. How about we get down to business?” said Horikita, taking out a notebook.

She handed it over to me. I didn’t need to ask about the contents. This was what Horikita had been working on for a while lately.

“I’ve come up with a plan that I think is best for Class C. I’d like you to give me your opinion of it,” said Horikita.

After saying that, she added one more thing.

“You *did* eat my cooking after all, didn’t you?”

Talk about playing dirty. *She hands over the reward first, and then expects me to put in the work to earn it?*

Without batting an eye, I took the notebook and opened it up. It was packed full of information about the special exam. There were also notes on the ten events from Class A, but because those events had just been announced today, they seemed to be a work-in-progress.

Incidentally, the ten events chosen by Class C were: English, Basketball, Archery, Swimming, Tennis, Ping Pong, Typing Skills, Soccer, Piano, and Rock Paper Scissors. The last one seemed like it had just been tossed in as a secret, last-ditch measure for when we were really in trouble. Horikita had also noted who would be best for each event and what our chances of winning were.

Everything that we needed was collected in this notebook. I quietly scanned through the notes in great detail. Horikita made a face like she was surprised when she saw what I was doing.

“Putting the fact you fed me dinner aside, you didn’t think that I was going to read this seriously, I’m guessing?” I asked.

“W-Well, that’s true, I didn’t. I was prepared for you to refuse, but...”

“You’ve compiled all this data through careful analysis for the upcoming exam. It’s crucial. I wouldn’t be able to demonstrate my ability as a commander if I didn’t take a look at it,” I told her.

There wasn’t a single discrepancy between what she had recorded here and the things that I had happened to learn about myself.

“The data you’ve collected here almost feels like it lays the entire class bare.”

“That data is the culmination of everything I’ve collected after a week of intense struggling. If it wasn’t accurate, I’d be in trouble.”

As long as we had this, anyone could probably be the commander, if it came to that.

“I’m going to continue refining the information included in the notes. Eventually, I’ll include who should be assigned to each of Class A’s ten events. I was thinking you could take a look, so you can use it in your role as commander,” said Horikita.

“I see. Well, I suppose Sudou and Akito would both be a force to be reckoned with, even outside of a one-on-one event. In Onodera’s case, though, I think her chances of winning will probably diminish if she’s pitted against a guy. It would probably be wise to consider a third or fourth candidate ahead of time,” I told her.

Horikita quietly nodded. It would be a shame to jump the gun and commit a student to a certain event when there was a possibility that they might really shine in others. In any case, I had nothing to complain about so far. This was great work.

“I have no objections to anything in your notes. However, can I just add one thing?” I asked.

“What is it?” she asked.

“One of the events that Class A chose was chess, if I recall, right?”

I took a sip of water after bringing up the new topic. Since none of our classmates were good at chess, that space in the notebook was naturally left blank.

“Yes. I’ve been putting off deciding what to do about that event. I’ve never played it before, myself. The only person who knows the rules to the game in our class is you, the commander. So I thought that I might ask your advice about it,” said Horikita.

“Well, about that, I’d like you to be the one to play.”

“...Me? I suppose it’s true that no matter who we went with, they’d have to practice anyway, but...why me?” she asked, before adding that she wouldn’t be able to get very good at the game, nor would she be able to win.

“Because I think that you’re the right person for me to teach,” I told her.

“You mean you’d have an easier time teaching me, since you wouldn’t have to build a relationship with someone new?”

“Well, I’d be lying if I said that that wasn’t part of it.”

“I suppose that I’m fine with accepting that role, but...I’m sure there are a few students who would be amenable to you, aren’t there? Besides, I think that there are other events where I would prove useful,” said Horikita.

Horikita was essentially good all around. Whether it was a written test or a sporting event, she’d produce results. I had no doubt about that.

“What we’re looking for is pure skill. There’s a time limit on the commander’s involvement in the game. No matter how confident Sakayanagi is at chess, there’s just not enough time. I can’t imagine Class A will use the option to bring in the commander right away at the start of the match. If they do, though, then the opening moves will be crucial to winning the game.”

If we were overwhelmed in those opening moves of the game, it would become extremely difficult for us to bounce back.

“You’re not focusing on chess simply because you know the rules to it, are you? You think Class A is going to pick chess as one of the main five events?” she asked.

“I’m almost certain they will. The fact that chess is the only event where the commander has such strong influence does worry me,” I told her.

“That’s certainly something that’s been bothering me too... Very well. I’ll defer to your judgment, then.”

I showed that I was grateful for her consent, and then continued eating my meal.

“By the way, how are we going to practice playing chess?” she asked.

“This probably is going to be tough for you, but we’re going to have to practice online, in the middle of the night,” I told her.

“Well, it’s certainly true that if we do it that way, we won’t be seen by anyone. And on top of that, no one will know what we’re doing.”

Another advantage was that it wouldn't get in the way of practicing for other events.

I HAD BEEN HOPING that our conversation would have been over right then and there, but unfortunately, things seldom go as one wishes.

“I have a favor to ask you, Ayanokouji-kun. You *did* eat my cooking after all, didn’t you?” said Horikita.

“Don’t you think it’s underhanded to pull the same thing on me over and over?” I replied.

Just when we were about halfway through dinner, that demon reared her head once more. I supposed the notebook she showed me earlier wasn’t the end of it, then.

“Underhanded? Considering what kinds of methods *you* employ, I would think it would be more accurate to describe you that way, hm?” she snapped.

“What are you talking about?”

“The class vote exam. You were the one running around behind my back, weren’t you? Answer me.”

“Wait. I didn’t do any—”

“Oniisan gave me advice. But you were the one behind it,” she snapped.

I couldn’t imagine from the way she was speaking that she was just coming up with these ideas randomly. On the other hand, it was unlikely that her brother had leaked anything.

“I didn’t notice at first. But after thinking about it for a while, I knew.”

Meaning she had managed to arrive at this conclusion on her own.

“You predicted everything I was going to do,” she added.

“Even if I denied that, it doesn’t seem like you’d believe me,” I told her.

“Yes. Well, it goes without saying that I have no conclusive proof that you did anything. If I did ask oniisan about it, I’m sure he wouldn’t say anything to even imply you were involved. But it’s become a certainty in my mind,” said Horikita.

Little by little, Horikita had matured over this past year. That was something both her brother and I both recognized. But, as the antagonism she had with her brother had diminished, she began to blossom almost immediately. I was sure that her brother, who had been around her for much longer than I had, was aware of her high levels of latent potential. That was probably why he got so fed up with his little sister doing nothing but chasing after him.

“You seem awfully uncomfortable,” said Horikita.

“That’s because it feels like I’m in the middle of a hostile interrogation.”

“Well, whatever. Judging from your attitude, it’s clear I’m not going to break you, anyway,” said Horikita, bringing that subject to a close for the time being.

It seemed I was going to have a harder time manipulating her from behind the scenes from now on.

“I have some more questions for you, but you’re free not to answer,” she added.

Her gaze was powerful. It seemed to grab hold of me and didn’t let go.

“Do you think that we can win against Sakayanagi-san?” she asked.

“I don’t think it’s entirely impossible, at least. That’s the impression I get when I look at your notes.”

“...Very well. I’ll contribute how I can, by bringing the class together.”

“You’ve been doing a great job of that lately.”

In Hirata’s absence, almost everyone in our class had been acting on Horikita’s instructions. She was prepared to take charge and guide our class to victory. Honestly, I wanted to thank her for taking the lead on things I couldn’t do.

“I’ll leave the rest to you. It’s your call.”

“Understood. Even so, wouldn’t it be better for you to make decisions related to the rules for the commander’s involvement?” she asked.

“Nah, it’s fine if you handle it.”

“...Are you saying you plan to do battle with just the information I prepare for you?” she asked.

“I don’t really know that much about our class, anyway.”

“Good lord... If you think you can beat Class A like this, then you’re naïve.”

“Maybe.”

Horikita walked me over to the entrance to her room, and then watched me go as I left.

“I’ll say thanks for the meal this time, but...don’t do this to me again,” I told her. I could imagine myself jumping at shadows every time someone invited me to share a meal.

“All right. I’ll come up with another scheme.”

No, that’s not what I’m asking...

A FEW DAYS BEFORE our showdown with Class A, Keisei managed to successfully get in touch with Katsuragi. Shortly afterward, he called me, asking me to come out to a spot where no one else would be around. Since Katsuragi was essentially isolated and acting on his own right now, it probably wasn't too hard to get hold of him.

"...So what can I do for you, Yukimura?" Katsuragi, who was probably burning with intense anger at Sakayanagi, had his sharp gaze fixed on Keisei.

"There's something we'd like you to help us with, Katsuragi," Keisei answered.

"Considering you're calling me out to talk right now, I suppose I don't even need to ask what it is you're suggesting."

From the looks of it, Katsuragi had already sensed what Keisei was about to propose.

"Then, this will be quick. I was hoping that you could tell us which five events Class A plans on choosing officially. And one more thing. I'd like you to throw any events that you're involved in, during the exam," said Keisei.

That last part was something he hadn't previously mentioned to either Horikita or me.

"And what exactly would I be getting in return for doing so?" he asked.

"We would welcome you into our class."

"That's an interesting offer. You want me to betray Class A and drop to Class C?" he replied, letting out an amused sneer, dismissing Keisei's proposal.

"We will make it to Class A someday. We're capable of doing so," said Keisei, implying Katsuragi could choose to make the change once we became Class A.

But to Katsuragi, the words probably sounded like nothing more than nonsense.

"You'll make it to Class A someday, hm? If you ask any other

class, they'd say the same thing," replied Katsuragi.

"Well, but..."

"And if you really do possess the ability to do so, then why don't you try to win against Class A without resorting to underhanded tactics like this? You can't, so you're trying to use me. Isn't that right?" said Katsuragi.

Keisei fell silent at this powerful reprimand. Katsuragi's tone was close to scornful, and his words left Keisei unable to respond.



“Well, all right. Let’s suppose that you really will make it up to Class A. Are you saying you’re going to offer me the twenty million points in exchange for that information right now? No, that’s probably unlikely. If you could provide that amount to me right now, then you could’ve used it to prevent Yamauchi from being expelled.”

Of course, Katsuragi also knew that we didn’t have such a vast number of points.

“Well, that’s...” sputtered Keisei.

“Were you planning on asking me to wait for two years for you to come up with twenty million points?” asked Katsuragi.

“...Yes.”

“You must understand what a ridiculous fantasy that is. Even if you do make it to Class A, there is no guarantee whatsoever that you’ll be able to come up with the twenty million points by then. We could draw up a contract, but that’s meaningless if you don’t have the points. You can’t give what you don’t have. Wait a minute. Did everyone in Class C even agree on this offer in the first place?”

Katsuragi was not an idiot by any stretch of the imagination. I was sure he understood the situation in our class quite well. If this was an offer that everyone in Class C had agreed upon, then the person who came to meet him would have been Horikita. Since Keisei and I were the ones talking to him right now, it was quite obvious this was all happening off the record.

“I understand full well that you’re desperate, but you’re not even prepared to negotiate your deal. Were you planning to talk to the rest of your class after you got me to cooperate with you, and then get their permission? Did you really think I’d accept such an offer?”

Betraying your classmates wasn’t something you did easily. Even more so for a man with a strong sense of duty, like Katsuragi.

“...S-So, you’re really just going to sit back and let Sakayanagi keep you quiet? Keep you down?” asked Keisei.

“What?”

“Do you really want to stick with Class A, even though they got Totsuka expelled?” Keisei, having realized he wasn’t going to convince Katsuragi of anything, decided to go for broke and push ahead, even if that meant being shot down. “I can’t guarantee I could just sit around

and wait in such a pathetic state until graduation. That'd be the coward's way out."

"So in the end, you resort to trying to get a rise out of me by telling me I'm pathetic. You get zero points for negotiation skills like that, Yukimura."

"Gr!"

Katsuragi looked over at me where I stood next to Keisei.

"Is there anything you'd like to say, Ayanokouji?" he asked.

"No, I think you're exactly right, Katsuragi. There's no room for argument from us."

Recognizing that as a white flag, Katsuragi directed his gaze back at Keisei.

"Yukimura, it's not like I want to criticize you or anything. But if you want me to betray my class, then you really need to be better prepared," he said.

Katsuragi leaned against the wall and turned his gaze away from us, looking somewhere far into the distance. He wasn't looking *at* something. It was more like he was looking at nothing at all.

"That being said, you were right about one thing," he added.

"...Right about what?" Even though Keisei had already completely lost his will to fight, he looked up when he heard Katsuragi say that.

"It is true that I am inexplicably angry with Sakayanagi. To me, that makes it worth taking action against her personally, even if you can't offer me anything in return," said Katsuragi, arms crossed, now fixing his gaze firmly on Keisei. "You might have already guessed this, but Sakayanagi has not shared what our official five events will be with anyone."

Just as I'd expected. Sakayanagi was keeping her plans secret, playing her cards close to the chest.

"And I don't like that, personally. That's not how we should be doing things. In an exam like this, the entire class should be working together. We should share information with our allies, and adopt strategies that provide a sure path to victory," said Katsuragi.

The biggest advantage of not sharing information with your class was that the five events you were choosing wouldn't be leaked.

However, that also made it that much more difficult for anyone to practice for those events. Trying to prepare equally for all ten would naturally reduce class efficiency.

“However, if you have no issues with me simply telling you what my predictions are, I wouldn’t mind telling you that,” said Katsuragi.

“R-really?!” exclaimed Keisei.

Just as Keisei had determined there was no way he could win Katsuragi over, he unexpectedly caught a lucky break. I supposed it just went to show how strongly Katsuragi resented Sakayanagi.

“That’s...only so long as you promise you won’t tell anyone else what I’m about to you, however,” added Katsuragi.

“O-of course. I’ll wait a bit and bring up the twenty million points with Horikita and the others later,” replied Keisei, nodding to signal his promise.

“That won’t be necessary. Even if the information I provide you with proves to be beneficial, you probably won’t be able to save up twenty million points,” said Katsuragi.

“Then what do you want in return?”.

“Nothing. If I had to name anything, it would simply be that I want you to defeat Sakayanagi,” said Katsuragi. “I’m absolutely certain that Chess, English Test, and Mathematics Test will be chosen as official events. Those three for sure. After that, I think Contemporary Literature Test and Flash Mental Arithmetic are most likely. Conversely, I would say it’s fair to assume events that require a large number of participants, such as XL Jump Rope and Dodgeball, are most likely meant to fake you out. From what I can tell, our class doesn’t seem to be practicing for those,” said Katsuragi.

We wouldn’t know if he was correct until the day of the exam. If more than three of the events he mentioned as likely candidates for the official test ended up on there, then it would be fair to assume he was right.

“Are you really okay with this? With not getting anything in return, I mean,” said Keisei.

“I already told you. Even if you don’t have enough bargaining power to convince me of anything, it’s still worth it for me to help you,” said Katsuragi.

Keisei had managed to get information from Katsuragi that he'd thought would be difficult to obtain, albeit in an unexpected way. He was probably filled with joy right about now.

"Th-this is awesome, Kiyotaka! Now we've got a chance to win this thing!" exclaimed Keisei, pumping his fist excitedly.

"One more thing. You said you wanted me to throw any events that I'm in, didn't you?" said Katsuragi.

"Uh, oh, well. You don't have to—"

"Hmph. You came all this way to negotiate with me, and now you're satisfied with just getting information?" replied Katsuragi, letting out a slight chuckle, as if he found Keisei's flustered reaction amusing.

"Well, it's not like that, it's..."

"Don't go thinking that you can beat Sakayanagi half-cocked. It's best for you to assume you'll still barely be able to hold your own, even if I do slack off during the events. However, the only event I can really help you in is probably Flash Mental Arithmetic. Or, in the unlikely event that it's chosen, XL Jump Rope," said Katsuragi.

I decided to ask Katsuragi just one question.

"Will you even be allowed to participate, with Sakayanagi being so wary of you right now? I suppose you might have to participate at least once if the XL Jump Rope event is chosen. But in the end, since only one or two participants can make or break the Flash Mental Arithmetic event, what makes you think she'll count on you?" I asked.

"That's because the students in our class who are best at mental arithmetic are me and one other student, Tamiya. And Tamiya isn't *that* good at it. With that in mind, leaving me out of the running for the event would simply lower our chances of winning. Sakayanagi probably thinks she's completely subdued me by having Yahiko expelled. She'll probably appoint me a role so she can use me like a pawn," said Katsuragi.

I supposed that to Sakayanagi, the idea of making a pawn of Katsuragi, a force who resisted her, would be quite appealing. Katsuragi offered to help us by deliberately getting questions wrong in the event that the Flash Mental Arithmetic event was chosen or by jumping on the rope right away if the XL Jump Rope event was chosen.

"However, I'd like to avoid Sakayanagi finding out that I'm losing

on purpose. I could make it look as though I happened to mess up on accident for the XL Jump Rope event, but I can't intentionally make mistakes on the easy questions for the Flash Mental Arithmetic event."

So, even though we'd be pretending to compete on equal ground, we'd just barely come out on top.

"If Flash Mental Arithmetic is chosen as one of the events, but I'm not selected to participate, then you'll just have to recognize that luck wasn't on your side and give up," said Katsuragi.

Regardless, we'd been provided with some very valuable information. We had no reason to complain.

After Katsuragi left, Keisei spoke excitedly. "Let's hurry and tell Horikita about this right away."

"No...I think it would be best if we don't tell her we contacted Katsuragi today yet," I replied.

"Wh-why?" he asked.

"In retrospect, it only happened to play out well for us by chance. She'll be ticked off if she finds out we arbitrarily took action on our own," I told him.

"Even so, we should be putting this information to good use, shouldn't we?" said Keisei.

"I want to find the right time to tell her. I'll make sure it goes well," I told him.

Keisei seemed a little bothered at first but eventually agreed, probably because he felt guilty for having met Katsuragi in secret like this.

Chapter 7: A Man's Tears

WE'D MANAGED to get our hands on some intel through our little chat with Katsuragi. But it wasn't like Class C had the upper hand. Horikita, well aware of where we stood, was trying to address our concerns one by one.

"Wait a minute, Hirata-kun," she said, calling out to Hirata as he stood up at his desk when class ended, about to head back to the dorm.

He was the first student to try to leave. This was also the first time she had called out to him since after the in-class voting exam.

Hirata simply stopped in his tracks but didn't turn around to face her.

"I imagine you don't want to talk to me, so allow me to just confirm one thing. You will not be participating in any of the events Class C chooses. And there are no plans to have you in play on the day of the exam. But things may change, depending on the situation. Sakayanagi-san understands what's going on with you, so we must assume it's possible she'll throw in multiple events that require quite a few people to participate," said Horikita.

No matter how much Class C tries to accommodate Hirata, there was still the possibility that all thirty-eight students would have to participate.

"If that time comes, what will you do? Will you apathetically drag your feet? Or will you put in the bare minimum required of you? I'd like you to answer me that much," said Horikita.

However, Hirata didn't answer. A heavy silence filled the classroom. Then, as we felt time start to move forward again, Hirata started walking away.

"So, you can't even give me an answer, huh?" huffed Horikita, exasperated. Fed up, she averted her gaze, as if to say she had given up.

"...Hey, uh, maybe we...aren't gonna win in the end anyway after all... With Hirata-kun being like this, I mean," said one of the girls in class, her voice filled with concern.

The boys probably felt the same way. The guy who'd been pulling the class forward was absent, and his absence continued to place a heavy burden on Class C's shoulders, time and time again.

"You told me that getting Hirata back to normal depended on the efforts of those around him. But in the end, nothing has changed," said Horikita, addressing me.

"I'm not so sure."

"Huh...?"

Horikita looked up with a puzzled expression on her face, but she and I were looking in different places.

"Hirata-kun! Wait!"

I had no idea how many times Mii-chan had cried out like that by now. She hurriedly grabbed her bag and chased after him.

"Mii-chan still hasn't given up," I told her.

"I'll never begin to understand why not," huffed Horikita.

"You have work to do, Horikita. Keep Class C together and improve our chances."

No one in our class could do that right now, except for Horikita.

I followed after Mii-chan, and found her standing face to face with Hirata on the path leading back to the dormitory. This definitely wasn't some bittersweet confession of love, though. She was going on the offensive to get her classmate, Hirata, back on his feet.

"Please, Hirata-kun. We need your help, Hirata-kun...so."

"Mii-chan, please, enough. Can you please just leave me alone already...?" Hirata grumbled heavily. He was probably wondering how many times he was going to have to repeat himself.

His sharp words cut like a knife. I was sure they pierced her heart deeply. However, the determination in her eyes showed no signs of wavering. Even if he pushed her away again and again, Mii-chan continued to persist.

"I-I can't leave you alone... Not when you're like this, Hirata-kun. I can't," she replied.

"In that case, how can I get you to? Please tell me."

"Well, um, by going back to how you used to be, Hirata-kun..."

“Back to how I used to be? I can’t.”

His cold words rained down on Mii-chan over and over, without mercy.

“No, that’s not true! I-I believe that you can, Hirata-kun!”

“I already told you, I can’t. I don’t want you to believe in me.”

“Even so, I do!” she shouted.

Hirata clenched his fist. Depending on how the conversation went, it felt like he might even throw a punch.

“Okay, then bring Yamauchi-kun back,” he told her.

“Wha...?”

“That’s what it’ll take for things to go back to normal.”

Yamauchi had been expelled. He was never coming back to our class. And in the same way, Hirata was never going back to how he used to be, either. That was the truth he was trying to convey to Mii-chan.

“That’s...”

“I really wish you could have understood that before you came to talk to me,” said Hirata.

He turned his back to her and tried to walk away. But Mii-chan reflexively reached out and grabbed his right arm, holding him back—because if Hirata made it back to his dorm room, then it would mean she’d been unable to do anything to help him today, either.

“Will you let me go?” he asked.

“I-I won’t!”

Despite the fact that Hirata had rejected her, Mii-chan firmly held her ground. She believed her feelings would surely reach him if she did so. I continued to watch the scene unfold some distance away, deciding I shouldn’t carelessly get too close and get in Mii-chan’s way.

Hirata let out an obvious sigh. Then he raised his right arm quickly and shook it as hard as he could to break free of Mii-chan’s grasp.

“Kyah!”

It was a forceful move, completely unlike Hirata. The momentum unintentionally caused Mii-chan to fall to the ground.

“...Leave me alone already. If you don’t... I... I...”

Mii-chan looked up at Hirata. His gaze, filled with anger, wounded her once more.

“I have nothing else left to lose. If you keep hanging around me...” said Hirata, his words trailing off.

He was about to bring the hammer down on Mii-chan. To say something so devastating that all the things he’d said and done so far wouldn’t even begin to compare. But then, at the last minute, a lone man walked past me. His blond hair fluttered in the wind and he smelled of cologne.

“My, my. It would seem you’re dithering again today, hm? And you’re showing everyone such an unseemly side of yourself,” teased Kouenji, trying to get a rise out of Hirata.

He typically went straight back to the dorms after class, too.

“Well, now, don’t worry about me. Carry on with what you were doing. I’ll simply watch,” said Kouenji.

Hirata wasn’t foolish enough to continue what he was doing after hearing that. Instead, he directed his hostility at the man who was getting in his way.

“Is there...something you want from me...?”

“Want? There’s nothing I want. I already have everything, after all,” replied Kouenji, walking past Hirata and Mii-chan. “But...hmm. Come to think of it, if I had to name something I wanted from you, it would be...”

This was just something he’d happened to stumble into on his way back to the dorm. Nothing more and nothing less. Hirata’s feelings meant nothing to him.

“You’re an eyesore, so could you please go ahead and remove yourself from my sight? If this is no longer your ideal school, then why don’t you just drop out?”

How very like Kouenji. He was essentially telling Hirata that he might as well just leave if he was going to keep hemming and hawing like this.

“...Shut up. You have no idea how I feel,” said Hirata.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. However, I can make a few

guesses. You're going to tell me that you can't simply drop out because it would cause trouble for your classmates, hm? What nonsense."

"P-please stop, Kouenji-kun! Hirata-kun hasn't done anything wrong!" shouted Mii-chan, standing up, trying to stop Kouenji's relentless verbal assault on Hirata.

"Oh ho. It would seem what I said displeases you. My apologies." Despite the smirk on his face, Kouenji treated Mii-chan with a certain degree of respect. "However, the sooner you forget about Hirata Boy here, the better. He's already beyond help."

Hirata, who had already been nearing his limit for a while, opened his eyes and closed in on Kouenji.

"N-no, don't, Hirata-kun!"

Mii-chan, sensing something was obviously wrong here, put herself between the two of them. But Hirata pushed her out of the way more forcefully than when he shook her off before, then reached for Kouenji without even looking at her. He tried to grab Kouenji's collar with his right hand but was quickly intercepted by Kouenji's left. Kouenji held Hirata's wrist firmly.

"Gr!"

"Understand, I show no mercy to anyone who comes after me. I don't want anyone to mar my beautiful face," said Kouenji. He tightened his grip on Hirata's wrist, causing an expression of pain and anger to appear on Hirata's face.

"Enough already! God, you're so annoying, Kouenji...!"

"You're free to do as you please. But I don't need to be told what to do by someone who makes a girl cry," said Kouenji.

He looked over at Mii-chan, who was sitting on the ground. Then he let go of Hirata's wrist and spoke once more.

"You knocked her down. Shouldn't you extend your hand to her?"

"...This has nothing to do with me."

"Nothing to do with you, hm? My, aren't you cruel."

Mii-chan averted her eyes from Hirata, unable to look directly at him.

"Well, no matter. You're free to do as you please, Hirata Boy."

“Wh-wh-what?!”

Kouenji gallantly swooped down and picked Mii-chan up.

“Well, since you’re not going to do anything, I suppose I’ll take care of her myself,” he said.



Hirata and Mii-chan were both stunned by this newest move from Kouenji, already someone whose actions no one could ever predict.

“You’re heartbroken, and moreover, you’re hurt. Why don’t I heal your pain?” said Kouenji.

“B-b-b-b-but, wait, huh?! I’m not hurt anywhere though!”

“Now, now. No need to worry. Despite how I may appear, I am exceedingly gentle, you see.”

The injury that Kouenji was referring to likely wasn’t physical but emotional. He was probably talking about a broken heart. Probably.

Kouenji moved farther away, as if he were trying to get Mii-chan away from Hirata.

“Hey, um, please put me down!” exclaimed Mii-chan.

“Ha ha ha! I’m afraid I cannot do that. I’ve already taken you!”

“Whaaat?!”

Hirata glared at Kouenji’s back. Kouenji stopped in his tracks, almost as if he had sensed it.

“Are you unhappy with me, hm?” he asked.

Honestly, I wished he would just ignore Hirata at this point...

“You’re just going to keep on hurting me forever, huh. Forever and ever?”

“No, no. You’re the one hurting those around you. At the very least, I wouldn’t ignore a girl who showed me affection, hm?”

Kouenji started to walk away again, ignoring Mii-chan’s fussing. When Hirata realized he was headed toward the dormitory, he started walking in another direction, probably not wanting to be around him anymore. I hesitated for a moment, then decided to follow Kouenji.

Also, Mii-chan’s bag was still on the ground. I scooped it up and went after them. Once he got to the dormitory entrance, Kouenji gently set Mii-chan back down.

“K-Kouenji-kun, why...?”

“*Fu fu fu*. Hm, why indeed, hm?” he replied, smiling instead of answering her question, then added, “At any rate, you should really give up on pursuing Hirata Boy.”

I came forward and handed Mii-chan her bag.

“Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun... Wait, where did you come from?” she asked.

I could have told her that I was good at hiding my presence. But I didn’t.

“I’ll stay here and keep an eye on you until you get to the elevator, all right?” said Kouenji.

“...O-okay,” said Mii-chan.

Even if she went to look for Hirata right now, she didn’t know where he’d gone. Mii-chan gave up and got in the elevator to escape Kouenji. I watched as he went over and took a seat in the lobby.

“Now, then...did you have some business with me, hm? Ayanokouji Boy.”

“Why did you call Hirata out like that back there? You were probably just adding fuel to the fire. Or did you think you were doing it for the class’s sake?”

“It would seem you still don’t understand me, hm? Tsk, tsk.” He waved his finger at me. “I do *not* do things for the class’s sake. I only do the things that I want to do. Whether those actions positively or negatively impact the class is nothing more than a byproduct.”

So it was just incidental, hm? Kouenji only did what he wanted to do. The only exception to that rule was that he’d take action when at risk of being expelled himself.

“His presence is unsightly. It positively vexes me, like an insect.”

And he couldn’t help but call out to Hirata because of that?

“You selfishly indulge your every whim, doing exactly as you please, but what if we have another test like the in-class voting exam? What will you do then? To be frank, no one in our class is in quite as much of a bind as you, Kouenji.”

“*Fu fu fu*. It won’t matter. As long as I’m good enough,” said Kouenji.

He checked to make sure Mii-chan was no longer in the elevator, then stood up.

“That reminds me. You are the commander for this exam, if I recall.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not feeling very motivated. So I’d like you to avoid putting me in play.”

“Sorry, but Horikita’s the one making those kinds of calls. I don’t get to decide.”

“Surely you are mistaken, no? You’re the commander. As such, you have the right to make decisions, not her.”

As far as the rules were concerned, that was true, but... It didn’t seem like I could make Kouenji understand.

“Anyway, I ask that you please be flexible,” said Kouenji, before boarding the elevator and heading toward his room.

7.1

I DECIDED TO LEAVE the dorm and look for Hirata. He probably hadn't gone back to the school building, so he might be at Keyaki Mall or somewhere nearby. Assuming he wanted to avoid people, chances were high that he was somewhere outside. I decided to just walk around and look.

After about an hour of searching, I came across a lonely figure sitting on a bench.

"Hirata," I called when I was close, almost within arm's reach.

"...Ayanokouji-kun," he responded slowly, still downcast.

It had been a while since I'd gotten a good look at his face like this. He must not have been sleeping well, because I noticed dark circles under his eyes.

"Do you have a minute?" I asked.

After hearing my request, his eyes opened up a little more.

"I'm just sick and tired of all of this. Why do people just keep coming after me, again and again? I thought you were the one person who understood me, Ayanokouji-kun. I thought you'd leave me alone. I'm disappointed," said Hirata.

"Sorry. If you don't like it, why don't you push me like you did Mii-chan, and run away?"

Despite my deliberate attempt at provocation, Hirata didn't get up from the bench.

"A minute, huh? Well, it's fine. It's not like there's anywhere I can run to at this school, anyway. I'm too exhausted to run anymore, today. But...I'm sure I'll just disappoint you, too."

I was sure a great many students had tried talking to him in this short period of time. Voices of concern, voices of encouragement—either way, it must have hurt. Although I didn't know who'd tried to talk to him, I could imagine what they'd tried to say. I was sure they tried to mend his heartbreak, to comfort him with kindness and gentleness.

The two of us sat on the bench with no one else around.

“So...what did you want to talk about?” asked Hirata.

I already knew how Hirata was planning this conversation to go in his head. He was thinking he'd just sit there and listen, the words going in one ear and out the other, and that would be it.

“I want you to tell me your story,” I told him.

“Huh?” He sounded apathetic, caught off-guard. I was sure he'd been expecting me to express my sympathies.

“What kind of kid you were. What did you think about then? I want to hear about it.”

“...Why?”

“Dunno. Just felt like I wanted to know. I'm having a hard time coming up with a reason why.”

Hirata let out a heavy sigh and then slowly shook his head. “I don't really have the energy to remember the past right now. There's nothing to talk about.”

“No energy? Why?”

“What do you mean, why? I...”

The way he looked at me seemed to say, *Don't you get it?*

“So, why?” I repeated, ignoring the look.

“...Because Yamauchi-kun got expelled.”

I was forcing him to say things he didn't want to say. Hirata sounded annoyed, like he was aware of what I was doing.

“You're making me talk about something rough.”

“I'm just curious. If I've offended you, I apologize.”

“...It's all right.”

Hirata let out another sigh, lacking the energy to argue back. He hunched forward, shaking his head side to side. *I want you to leave me alone. Please stop caring about me.* That's what he was trying to say.

“What does Yamauchi getting expelled have to do with you not being able to talk about your past, though?” I asked.

Once again, Hirata wore an exasperated look in response to my persistent questioning. “My past doesn't really have anything to do with what's going on right now, does it?”

“Not necessarily.”

He tried to put a stop to our conversation there, but I kept going, not letting him bring it to a close.

“It’s awful when a classmate gets expelled, yeah. Everyone thinks so. But it’s not like we can afford to wallow over it forever. The Event Selection Exam is just around the corner now. It’s not just Horikita and Kushida—even Ike and Sudou are getting their heads in the game and preparing to fight. But why not you, Hirata? You keep dwelling on the issue of Yamauchi getting expelled, and even if you tried to help—”

I deliberately paused for a moment. Then I switched gears, showing him I didn’t really want to talk about that.

“What I *really* want to know is what caused you to have the system of values you have, Hirata,” I told him.

“What’s the point in talking about that? You think I’m going to tell you?”

“You will. Because you really want me to know just who you are, Hirata. You can’t help it.”

Truthfully, he probably did want to reveal his innermost thoughts. But he couldn’t do that, which was why I was here right now. *Talk.* Now, I told him with my eyes, encouraging him so powerfully that I was almost threatening him.

When he saw the look in my eyes, he seemed overcome by fear.

“I finally understand the real reason Karuizawa-san revealed everything about herself to you, Ayanokouji-kun. When I saw your eyes... Just now, when you *made* me see them. There’s a deep darkness there. So dark it’s terrifying...” said Hirata.

The darkness within Hirata was being eroded. By me. He wasn’t just waiting around for death to find him—he was begging to be saved, with each passing day. That was why he was grasping the black thread of salvation dangling before him. So that he could crawl out of hell.

“I think I’ve told you once before... About a close friend I had since I was little. When we were in junior high, he became a target for bullying,” said Hirata.

“Yeah, Sugimura, I think.”

“You even remember his name...”

It was precisely because I knew the story that I could make some predictions about Hirata's mental state. He'd wanted to help his friend back then but had been terrified of becoming the bullies' next target. As a result, he simply stood and watched on the sidelines. And then...

"My friend...committed suicide. He jumped."

At long last, Hirata was going to begin to recall what happened that day.

Slowly but surely, he started to tell me his story.

"Well, technically, he survived. He's barely clinging to life. But he continues to sleep, even now, with no signs of recovery..."

Hirata brought his hands together and clasped them tightly.

"I'm the one who drove him to try and take his own life. The weight of that responsibility hasn't changed."

"It's not like you're the only one at fault. Besides, it was other people who actually drove him to it," I told him.

"I suppose, but I think that being a bystander means I'm equally guilty," he replied.

He'd said something similar back when we were on the cruise ship. This was exactly why he wanted to save everyone around him. Hirata always took the initiative to address every problem that arose in our class, sparing no effort to find a solution. Like when Sudou got into a fight with those other guys, or the time he and Kei became a pretend couple.

However, there were some things that couldn't be explained by that alone.

"I understand that you still have some doubts," said Hirata, without looking at me. "So, it didn't end when my friend tried to kill himself by jumping..."

He'd told me the first part earlier, on the cruise ship. Apparently, there was more to this story.

"I thought the ordeal would be over after my friend tried to jump to his death. I thought that after such a heavy sacrifice, the bullying would end. But I was wrong. After that incident, I saw the unfathomable darkness of humanity," said Hirata.

He was trembling. Something like a murderous impulse flashed in

his eyes.

“The bullies chose a new target. One of my classmates,” said Hirata.

He stopped to bring his emotions back under control. He let out a sigh, then began to speak once more in a quiet murmur.

“I couldn’t believe it. They’d only *just* done something so awful, and now they were bullying someone new? This other kid, who was nothing but an innocent bystander, started getting the same treatment as my friend. And what’s more, some of my classmates who weren’t previously involved in the bullying before, started to join in now.”

The bullying continued to escalate, inexhaustibly.

“If the person at the bottom of the pecking order is gone, then it’s only natural someone else will take their place. It’s the natural order of things, I suppose,” I replied.

“I knew I couldn’t let it happen again. I knew that I had to stop it,” said Hirata.

“So...you took action?”

He nodded once. Then a second time, and a third.

“I took a certain approach to ensure the same mistake wouldn’t be made again,” said Hirata, slowly looking up and looking straight ahead. “Well, to put it simply...I tried to control the class through fear.”

“You did? Hirata?”

“Yeah. I’m not particularly strong, or good at fighting, like Sudou-kun or Ryuen-kun. But not many people can actually, seriously haul off and punch someone. Even if I was throwing punches for real, no one tried to hit me back. So I stood alone at the top of the class, while everyone else stayed at the bottom. I tried to end all the bullying that way. Whenever there was trouble, I was there to intervene. I gave both sides the same amount of punishment, the same amount of pain. There was no difference. But there was a brief moment of quiet,” he told me.

Hirata had probably known that wasn’t justice. And that it was wrong. But even so, he didn’t want to stand witness to a world where people were being abused.

“As a result, I wondered if...in the end, I destroyed that year of our lives. My classmates’ smiles were gone. Everyone moved like they

were emotionless robots. There was a lot of talk about it going around in the place I lived, at the time... People talked about it like it was a big scandal,” said Hirata.

“How did the school handle it in the end?”

“I think it was a pretty unprecedented response. All of the classes were broken up, forced apart. Then everyone was redistributed, starting with me. And we remained under strict surveillance until graduation.”

If the incident had been that big a deal, it was only natural that it reached a lot of ears. Which meant, in turn, that there was no way this school didn’t know about it. In fact, it might be precisely because they knew about the incident that they’d had Hirata enrolled here. I finally understood why he’d been placed in Class D.

“So, you can’t forgive yourself for Yamauchi being targeted and attacked, can you?” I asked.

“Yeah...I, well, I just thought as long as I didn’t actually hear anything, I’d pretend I didn’t know anything. I wanted to remain silent until the day of the actual vote,” said Hirata.

And then, as a result of Horikita’s trial, Yamauchi had been brought down. Deemed unnecessary.

“I’m useless. I should never have tried to keep the class together in the first place. Even though I did everything I could, in the end, I couldn’t protect Yamauchi-kun... You understand, don’t you, Ayanokouji-kun? I just can’t anymore. I even thought about trying to control people using fear again, to protect people. I’m sure you know as well as I that that was a huge mistake...” said Hirata, his voice trembling.

His heart was on the verge of breaking. Hirata thought our entire class should share everything, both the highs and the lows. He couldn’t bear to see anyone suffer, to see anyone disappear. I was sure he’d been asking himself these questions on loop.

It wasn’t clear how much he’d opened up to Mii-chan or to other students. However, I was sure I knew what sort of things they’d said back to him.

“There was nothing you could have done.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Hirata-kun.”

“Yamauchi was the one who messed up by betraying the class.”

I was sure that no matter who he asked, they'd tell him that Hirata was good and the other person was evil. That was never going to change. But, as a result, this problem remained unsolved. It was pointless to tell Hirata to blame someone when he was trying to protect them. If anything, that would just make him retreat further back into his shell.

"There's something that I want to make explicitly clear. It's not Horikita's fault that Yamauchi got expelled, and it wasn't my fault, either. Do you understand that?" I asked.

"...Yeah. I know there was no avoiding it. There was nothing any of us could do," said Hirata, before adding that he didn't blame me either, in a quiet voice.

I probably sounded like I was reminding him it wasn't my fault for what happened. It might have even sounded like I was asking him if he resented me.

"Whose fault do you think it is that Yamauchi got kicked out of our class? Out of school?" I asked.

"I would think...that it could be nobody but himself, I guess," concluded Hirata, saying something that he didn't want to admit.

Yamauchi had reaped what he had sown. He had been expelled as a result of his lack of skill and the choices he made.

"No, that's wrong." I rejected his answer. I flatly denied Hirata's naïve way of thinking. "It's your fault that Yamauchi got expelled, Hirata."

"I...!"

He looked up at me. The look on his face told me he couldn't understand what I just said.

"If you really wanted to save him, then you should've done everything you possibly could," I added.

"B-but... I, I tried...! There wasn't anything else I could have done!"

"Ichinose from Class B hasn't lost a single person."

"That's, but, that's because she's a special case. We didn't have a huge number of Private Points, so I couldn't do what she did!" he exclaimed.

“In that case, the problem is you not leading the class like she did. You should have been saving points all through the year, like Ichinose did, so you could save someone if they were about to be expelled,” I told him.

If he had done so, Yamauchi wouldn't have been expelled, and we would have still had forty people in our class.

“But that's impossible. We lost our class points almost immediately after we started school here. And even if we hadn't, there's no way that our classmates would agree to something like that,” said Hirata.

“The fact that we're at zero class points and the fact that you failed to guide the class into becoming one that would comply with a plan like that are both your fault,” I told him.

No matter how much Hirata tried to run, the fact he was at fault wouldn't change.

“But that's absurd! It's completely ridiculous.”

“Yes, it is absurd. But there's no getting around it. You *chose* to take this path. You should have just kept this fantasy of saving everyone to yourself. If you had, then no one could blame you, Hirata, no matter who got expelled. But if you continue to feel this way about the people around you, then you *will* take all the blame when you fail. You need to be prepared for that,” I told him.

“B-But I...!”

“I was wrong about you. I thought you were an honors student. A man of character who had the respect of many of his classmates. But that's not who you are. You're just a cheap, incompetent sham, who does nothing but talk a big game about stuff he can't even do,” I told him.

Of course, this was just me following an extreme argument to its conclusion. Hirata was by no means incompetent at all. He was an exceptionally talented person, and such a good student that it was hard to imagine he was just a first-year. There was nothing wrong with him saying that he wanted to protect people. And it wasn't like he was to blame just because he'd failed to do so.

But even so, I blamed him. I blamed him completely and entirely, putting pressure on him, pushing him persistently until he was about to

break apart.

Was I doing this because of Hirata? No. Was I doing this so I could empower him to protect everyone? No. There was no way he could protect everyone. I was sure someone else would be expelled in the future.

I was doing this because, when that time came, Hirata was one of the components we needed to keep the class functioning well.

“How long are you going to sit around and daydream?” I asked him.

Hirata hadn’t taken a single step forward since he was back in compulsory education, in junior high. High school was a place where students came of their own volition. A place where students made their own decisions about their education.

“This... This is what...you’re really like, isn’t it? Your words are so terrifying, merciless, and cold...” said Hirata. Tears welled up in one of his eyes, then the other.

“You’re free to wish for whatever you want. But if you truly desire something, you *have* to keep fighting for it to the bitter end, to push yourself to your limits. If people get expelled in the process, you have no choice but to accept that. No choice but to keep moving forward,” I told him.

“That’s...cruel.”

“If you stop right now, the students around you will disappear, one by one. Which is exactly why, if you keep your eyes trained on the goal and keep moving forward, when all is said and done and you do reach the end, there will be lots of students standing right behind you.”

It took a lot of courage to take the lead and walk ahead of everyone else. You never knew when an obstacle might block your path and bring you down.

“But...how do I let myself be vulnerable and say what’s bothering me...? Do I have to keep everything to myself and walk forward alone?” he asked.

“No, you don’t. When you’re in trouble, you can rely on your classmates. Horikita, Kushida, Sudou, Ike, Mii-chan, Shinohara. It doesn’t matter who. You can show your vulnerability and vent your frustrations to anyone you want to rely on. It doesn’t matter who’s

leading the pack or who's following. We're all in this together."

There was no rule that said the person leading the way couldn't show weakness. The people standing behind them could lend a hand when they faltered. Our classmates would be more than willing to let Hirata be vulnerable and listen to his problems.

"It's all right. It's all right for you to take the lead," I told him.

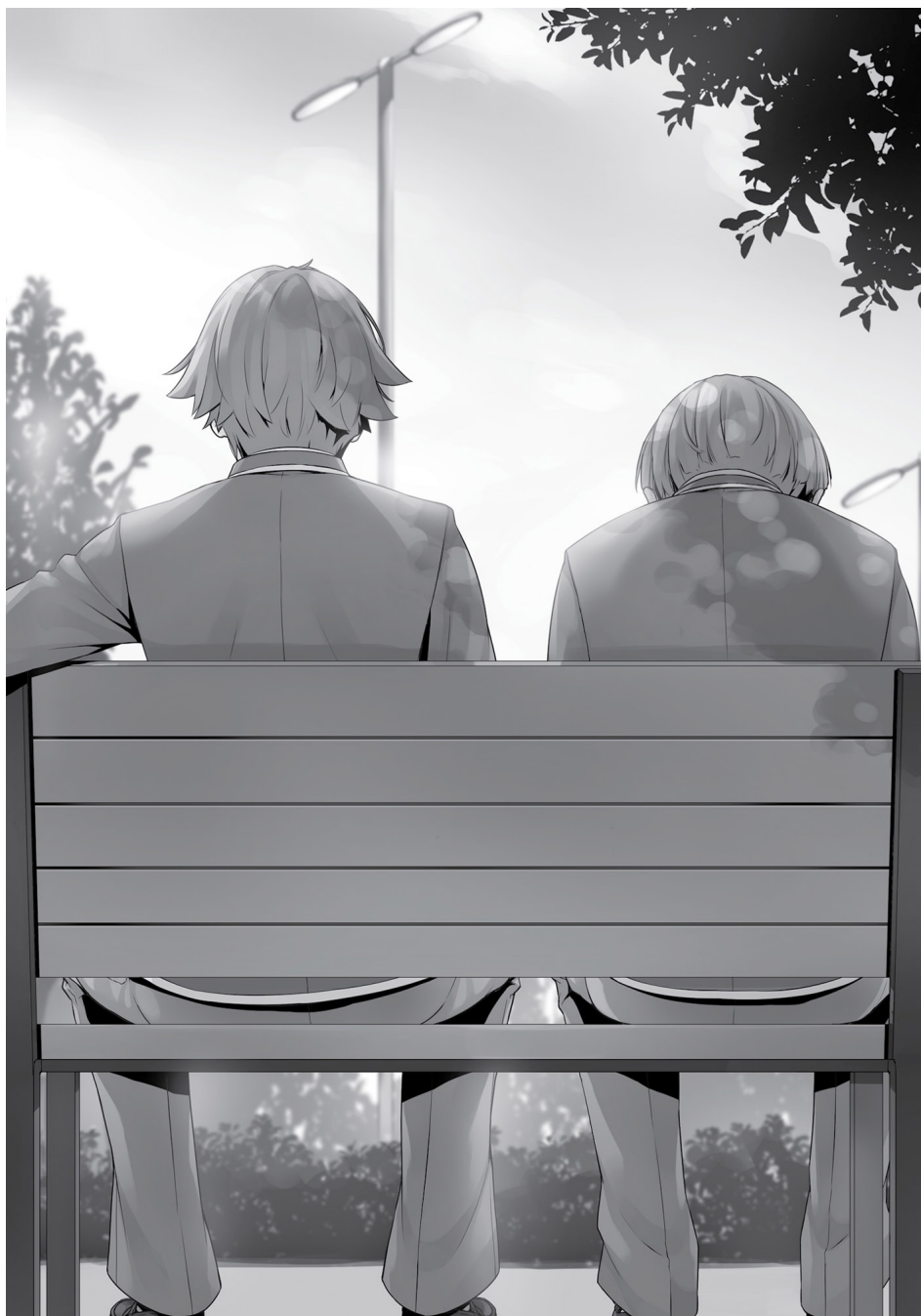
I patted him on the shoulder. With that small impact, more and more tears began to pour from Hirata's eyes. He was burying the past for good. He'd set down the heavy burden he'd been carrying all this time.

Hirata, who'd been trapped in place, was now able to stand up.

"Thank you... Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun..."

Hirata hung his head low, tears streaming down his face. Men are difficult, frustrating creatures who won't let others see them cry except in special circumstances. Which was exactly why I, too, wanted the kind of friendship where I could shed tears in front of someone.

No more words needed to be said. All he needed was a friend at his side, someone who he could be vulnerable with and who would listen. By doing that...he could begin walking forward again.



NIGHT CAME AND WENT, and the next day arrived. The final special exam of the school year was just around the corner. When I arrived at school, there was no sign of Hirata in the classroom. Mii-chan looked gloomy, as expected.

Even though everyone in class had tried to push Hirata to the back of their minds, they were still worried about him. But then—the man who Class C so desperately needed showed up.

And people were reluctant to even look at him.

“G-Good morning...Hirata-kun,” said Mii-chan.

Sure enough, she called out to him before anyone else did. She pushed aside her sadness and tried her hardest to put on a smile. Seeing that, Hirata approached her.

“Wha—!”

Mii-chan froze for a moment, perhaps remembering what happened yesterday. When Hirata saw her, he bowed deeply, as low as he could possibly go.

“Good morning. And also, I’m sorry about yesterday. I was really horrible to you, Mii-chan,” said Hirata, delivering an emotionally charged apology.

“...Huh?” she replied.

“You were always, always trying to be there for me, to talk to me, and I ignored you. I’m so sorry,” he added.

“B-but, well, I just...” she stammered.

It wasn’t just Mii-chan who was completely floored by Hirata’s clear change in behavior. Everyone in class was bewildered.

“Good morning...everyone!” said Hirata. He wore such a bright smile that everything before today felt like a lie.

“H-Hirata-kun?” said Mii-chan, puzzled.

“I’m all right. I’m all right now,” he replied, reassuring Mii-chan with a gentle smile on his face, before bowing to everyone else. Still bowed, he continued, “I understand it might be too late for me to

apologize by this point, but...if everyone is all right with it, I would like to contribute to the class however I can, starting today.”

The guys and girls of Class C exchanged looks. Several seconds passed as they struggled to understand what had just happened. And then...

“Hirata-kun!”

First, some of the girls in class rushed over toward Hirata’s side. They were followed by both guys and girls. Not a single person was unhappy to see Hirata’s long-awaited return.

“What happened?” asked Horikita, who had been watching from afar, still unable to get a grasp on the situation.

“I told you that it would depend on the efforts of everyone around him, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes, you did but... You don’t think he’s just forcing himself to act like that, or anything?” she asked.

“Does it look that way to you?” I replied.

“No, it doesn’t, I suppose.”

“Everyone processes things differently. Some might get over it quickly, while others might need more time. Some people are even capable of going right back to normal the day after a big fight, and getting along just fine again,” I told her.

That was just how human relationships worked.

Hirata, after being welcomed back with open arms, approached Horikita last. “Good morning, Horikita-san,” he said, looking directly at her with clear, honest eyes.

“Y-yes, good morning.” Horikita seemed shaken, perhaps overwhelmed by how radiant he seemed.

“I don’t think that I was wrong in the class trial incident the other day,” said Hirata.

“...I see.”

“But...I don’t think what you did was wrong, either. Or rather, what I should say is that you did the right thing,” said Hirata.

That was something he hadn’t been able to face at the time. But now, Hirata had resolved his own issues and come to accept it.

“I just hadn’t realized it at the time,” he added.

“Did you hit your head? Your way of thinking seems completely different from how it was just yesterday. And it doesn’t seem to me like you’re trying to put on a brave face or anything, but...” said Horikita, trailing off.

Despite her doubts, Hirata simply gave her an untroubled smile.

“I’ll do my utmost to regain the trust that I lost. I would like for you to give me the details of the special exam later,” he said.

“I understand. After you’ve gotten a grasp on the situation, I’ll test you to see whether or not you can really be of use. Is that all right with you?” she replied.

“Yes, of course,” he answered, stretching out his hand.

He was offering a handshake, asking for reconciliation. Horikita accepted. Afterward, Hirata was approached by his classmates once again, one after another. The classroom had become such a bright and cheerful place that it was hard to believe it had been submerged in gloom just a few minutes ago.

“Well, maybe this means that we’re finally ready to face the special exam,” said Horikita.

“Looks like it.” One might say Hirata’s return was the greatest boon Class C could have received at this point.

Kouenji seemed to be the only person unaffected by it, though.

Chapter 8: Ayanokouji VS. Sakayanagi

AFTER A LONG PERIOD of preparation, the day of the final special exam for the first-year students was here. The commanders of the two losing classes would be expelled—or, more accurately, stripped of their Protection Points. While no one would be getting expelled, you might say the most important aspect of this exam was that class points could fluctuate significantly. Depending on the outcome, there was a significant possibility that the entire class hierarchy would be flipped.

“Forget about all the data from the notebook I showed you yesterday and forget about everything I told you,” Horikita, my neighbor, said while we waited for our morning homeroom to begin. “Choose whatever five events you like and then select who will compete.”

“If I take over and it messes with your plans, won’t the other students be unable to adapt, though?”

“I made no promises to anyone about what events we were going with, or if they’d be put in play or not. I simply said that I would be playing things by ear, making decisions and reacting logically to our needs at the moment, depending on the ten events that come up and the order. So, it should be fine,” she answered.

Meaning she’d set everything up perfectly, and in such a way that I could fight without anything to bother me.

“I’m not taking responsibility even if something goes wrong, though,” I told her.

“This is a class-wide competition. Even if the commanders are able to intervene, this exam is basically testing Class C’s overall abilities. Our enemy is Class A, led by Sakayanagi-san. The most formidable opponent in our grade. Even if you lose, no one will blame you.”

Giving Horikita a sidelong glance, I checked the last message that she had sent me. It was a record of everything the students in Class C had done for the past two weeks to prepare for the special exam. Stuff like what everyone had discussed, what events students had practiced

for, and how they'd practiced for those events.

"I'll put your efforts to good use. All your efforts," I told her.

As I got up from my seat and was about to walk away, Horikita gave me a few parting words.

"The chances of chess being chosen are seven out of ten. That's not low," she told me.

Over the past several days, Horikita and I had played several games of chess.

"In the end, I hardly ever won against you, even when you were going easy on me," she added.

It was certainly true that she had only beat me a few times. Few enough to count on my fingers. But there was no need to count her losses, really. The chess skills Horikita had picked up in such a short period of time were quite impressive.

"No matter who I'm up against, there's no one out there stronger than me, even when I'm slacking off. Don't forget that," I told her.

"You sure have a great deal of confidence in yourself."

Having finished my conversation with Horikita, I left to go fulfill my duties as commander. The remaining students were basically on standby, waiting for me to issue them instructions from the multi-purpose room. After the events were announced, the students would then go to the designated locations, get changed, and so on. Since finer details wouldn't be shown on the monitors, information would probably be shared when they returned.

8.1

I ENTERED THE SPECIAL BUILDING and headed toward my destination. When I got there, I saw that Sakayanagi and Ichinose, who had arrived before me, were chatting. Apparently, the multi-purpose room hadn't been opened to us yet.

"Good morning to you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun!" said Ichinose.

They both greeted me at the same time. I raised my hand to give them a relaxed wave in response.

"Seems like we're not allowed in yet," I remarked.

"They told us to let them know once all four of us had arrived here," said Ichinose.

That was probably to ensure that the exam was carried out as fairly as possible. If someone were allowed to go in the multi-purpose room before everyone else, they'd be able to get a feel for the test location, perhaps even use that to calm their mind. Considering this was a particularly unique special exam, I supposed there was no limit to how far they'd go to ensure it was fair.

"Seems like we're only missing Kaneda then," I observed.

"Yep," replied Ichinose.

I looked around. While I still didn't see any sign of Kaneda, I supposed it wasn't like he would be late.

"I must say, you really are quite lucky, aren't you, Ichinose-san?" said Sakayanagi.

"Huh? Lucky?"

"As they are right now, Class D is essentially a bunch of infants. It's not like they could beat Class B, even in a million years. I suppose the only question that remains is how many wins you can accumulate, hm? If you manage to win all seven events in a row, then it's even possible that you'll change places with us, depending on how Class A performs," said Sakayanagi.

"Well, I don't know about that. I don't know what's going to

happen, but I'm sure they'll fight us tooth and nail. We can't be too careful," said Ichinose.

Upon seeing Ichinose's renewed determination, an amused smile appeared on Sakayanagi's lips.

"Oh, did I say something weird or something?" said Ichinose, puzzled.

"Not at all. It's just that you spoke as if you're already on top, just waiting for a challenger to appear. If nothing else, it seems you don't see Class D as an equal opponent. But I suppose that's only to be expected from the leader who defended Class B for the entire year," said Sakayanagi.

Her words were a touch mean-spirited. But Ichinose didn't let it get to her.

"We came here with a strategy to win this, too. We're not going down that easily, especially in an exam where unity plays such a big part," said Ichinose.

"I see. Please pardon my rudeness. You are most certainly correct, Ichinose-san," replied Sakayanagi.

I looked through the window while I listened to their conversation. April was almost here, and the weather was clear, with not a single cloud in the wide-open sky.

Five minutes passed, and we started to wonder if Class D might be late. Then, finally, we heard the faint sound of approaching footsteps from the hallway.

"Seems he's not late or he's abstaining from the contest due to nerves, after all." Sakayanagi sounded amused that Kaneda would be showing up at the last possible minute.

Ichinose seemed to be trying to regain her composure and focus, now that the test was finally about to begin. We'd meet up with Kaneda and all enter the multi-purpose room together. That was what the three of us had imagined would happen.

But...

Someone unexpected showed up instead.

Ichinose looked the most shocked of everyone present when this newcomer entered our field of vision. While Sakayanagi was surprised

as well, her eyes quickly changed to show amusement.

“...Ryuuen-kun? Why...are you here...?”

A wave of uneasiness seemed to wash over Ichinose. Well, actually, neither Sakayanagi nor I had expected this to happen.

“What’s the matter? What are you all upset for?” Ryuuen, the former leader of Class D, deliberately drew attention to the fact that Ichinose was upset.

“I see... Well, I hadn’t expected this. I had thoroughly convinced myself that the commanders for this special exam would be the students with Protection Points,” said Sakayanagi, the first of us to figure out what was going on. Kaneda was nowhere to be seen.

“The special exam can’t start without the commanders. Meaning, if the commander is absent, then obviously someone has to take their place. Isn’t that right?” said Ryuuen.

I supposed an unexpected absence on the day of the exam was certainly a possibility. There was probably some kind of system the school had in place for such an event, like having one or two people ready as replacements for the commander. And of course, if that happened, the substitute commander would be the one to accept responsibility in the event of a loss.

“I see. Still, I never imagined that this would happen and that you’d be here, Ryuuen-kun,” said Ichinose.

“Well, yeah, I s’pose not. Especially you, Ichinose. Even if you sprung a fever or got injured on the day of the event, I guess you’d still come crawling along the floor to avoid letting other students run the risk of gettin’ expelled, huh,” said Ryuuen.

There was no way to prevent the commander’s expulsion other than a Protection Point, in the event of a loss. Just as Sakayanagi had said, we’d all assumed that the students who had Protection Points would be the commanders for this special exam.

Ichinose cleared her throat. I was sure she’d been wary of this back when the special exam was first, but the possibility had vanished from her mind once Kaneda was determined to be the commander for Class D. If I had to guess, Ichinose had unconsciously gone through the options in her head and eliminated Ryuuen as a potential commander, without even realizing it. She’d assumed we’d all be facing off against

students who had Protection Points.

“So, I’m guessing that there must be some kind of penalty for someone to participate as a substitute, right?” asked Ichinose.

“Yep. Kaneda isn’t allowed to participate in any events. I mean, that’s pretty reasonable, all things considered,” answered Ryuen, apparently having already factored in the penalty into his decision.

“Did you do this to shock me? Even if you did, won’t it be bad for you guys if Kaneda-kun can’t participate?” asked Ichinose.

While I didn’t know everything there was to know about Kaneda, he was at least an asset to Class D. So what was the point of this bizarre strategy, which required losing him? That part gnawed at me. When had it been decided that Ryuen would be the commander? If it had been decided right away, did that mean that this was all part of the plan?

The same questions were undoubtedly racing through Ichinose’s mind right now, making her feel terribly confused.

“Hey, come on, no need to keep your guard up around me. I’m just a human sacrifice. The commander from the losing class gets expelled, remember? This just means that those Class D knuckleheads can officially get rid of me. That’s all there is to it, right?” sneered Ryuen.

“So, does that mean that you’ll take it easy on me?” said Ichinose.

“*Ku ku*. Sure, I’ll ease up on ya. So, just relax and bring it,” said Ryuen, spreading his arms out wide, like he was welcoming her to come at him.

But there was no way Ichinose was going to let her guard down.

“When you want to win, you do so by any means necessary. That’s the way you do things, isn’t it?” said Ichinose.

“When I’ve decided that I’m gonna win, then yeah, it is.”

“Well, I wish you wouldn’t. You don’t have a Protection Point, Ryuen-kun. You’re fighting with your back to the wall, making your last stand. I can’t help but have a sinking feeling Class B might end up losing this,” said Ichinose.

Ichinose was the kind of person who worked hard to build confidence, trust, and security from the ground up. She wasn’t good at

dealing with sudden, unexpected developments. She would've been just fine up against a normal opponent, but Ryuen was anything but normal.

The shock might not stop at Ichinose, either, but soon spread to the rest of the students in Class B. Everyone in her class would inevitably notice that Ryuen had become the commander. And even if they didn't, Ishizaki and the others would let them know. And if that happened, the Class B students wouldn't be able to hide how flustered they were, just like Ichinose. For Ryuen, who was supposed to have been neutralized, to have become the commander... The students of Class B couldn't possibly predict what he'd instruct his classmates to do, and that would scare them.

"Well, well, it seems the showdown between Class B and Class D is...shaping up to be quite interesting," said Sakayanagi.

This wasn't exactly a laughing matter for Ichinose, though. She should have taken action back when Class D students were repeatedly stalking and harassing her classmates. If she'd been able to detect Ryuen's presence in the background at the time, then she might not have been so flustered right now.

"Well, now that everyone is here, let's be going, shall we?" said Sakayanagi.

With Sakayanagi leading the way, we entered the multi-purpose room. When we got inside, we saw a newly constructed wall that hadn't been there on the first day. It divided the room into two perfect halves. Though it was a temporary construction, it looked quite sturdy, and seemed to be quite soundproof, too. The four instructors in charge of the first-year classes were lined up, waiting for us.

"Class B and Class D representatives, please move over to the other side," said Mashima-sensei.

As per his instructions, Ichinose and Ryuen went over to the other side of the wall, disappearing from view. Chabashira followed after them. We, the commanders of Class A and Class C, were guided by Class D's Sakagami-sensei and Class B's Hoshinomiya-sensei. It seemed the teachers had been put in charge of classes other than their own.

"The exam will begin in five minutes, so take this time to mentally prepare yourselves, okay?" Hoshinomiya-sensei advised us, before going off to have what looked like a final talk with Sakagami-sensei.

Sakayanagi and I had a little bit of time alone before the exam started. Just the two of us.

“Finally... The day has finally come. To be honest, I wasn’t able to sleep last night, and I almost overslept this morning,” said Sakayanagi.

“I don’t recall making you wait that long for this. Besides, it was just a coincidence that you and I met in the first place.”

“Are you saying that if you hadn’t come to this school, we wouldn’t have met?” she asked.

I nodded in response. She laughed, rejecting my answer.

“It’s certainly true that our reunion at this school was mere coincidence, yes. However, I was absolutely sure the day would come when we would meet again. It was fated to happen,” said Sakayanagi.

“Fate? Okay, now you’re saying some pretty abstract stuff,” I told her.

“I am but a young maiden, after all,” she answered, smiling, approaching me slowly while holding onto her cane. “If you hadn’t enrolled at this school, I suppose I would have postponed our meeting for another three years. I was confident I could rein in my excitement, hide it deep down, and avoid rushing things. But that quickly proved to be quite impossible. From the moment I knew you were this close to me, the days just seemed to get longer and longer. I wanted to fight you right away. It took an unbelievable degree of effort to restrain myself. That’s how much I dreamed of this day.”

The words poured eloquently from her mouth. So, her wish was being granted, huh?

“Aren’t you afraid of waking up from this dream?” I asked her.

Once we actually competed against each other, there’d be no going back from it.

“I suppose everyone has to wake up at some point,” she replied.

She didn’t mind if she woke up. Or maybe, that was just how she felt today.

“Normally, I would...ask you to please be gentle with me, but...” said Sakayanagi.

Her eyes didn’t look like that of a young maiden’s. They had the sharpness of a hunter stalking its prey.

“Please come at me with all your might,” she said.



If I pulled my punches, she wouldn't be happy. I wasn't doing this to make her happy...but it would get annoying to stay involved with her any further. At the same time, I had my doubts about whether this special exam would really satisfy her.

As if she had sensed what I was thinking, Sakayanagi spoke up once more. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel conflicted. The contents of this special exam are far too inadequate for both of us to sufficiently demonstrate our abilities. And even though we are the commanders, there is a limit to how much we can intervene."

The school would never implement an exam where the outcome depended on the efforts of a single person—the commander. Even so, Sakayanagi was saying that as long as the two of us could have our showdown, everything else was trivial.

"That being said, I suppose it would give rise to other problems if the commanders had *too* much involvement in the exam. I'm trying to be considerate of you, Ayanokouji-kun. You don't want your classmates to find out about your abilities, after all. Right?"

I was grateful for her consideration. If this test had been set up to let the commander's involvement have a significant impact on the outcome of every event, then I probably wouldn't have been able to use my abilities to their fullest.

"All right! The exam is just about to begin. Please take your seats!" said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

In response to her instructions, Sakayanagi and I sat across from one another, with the computers and equipment between us. Naturally, this meant we couldn't see each other's faces.

Displayed on my computer screen were pictures of the faces of everyone in Class C. Thirty-eight people, excluding me. These were the people I would be assigning as participants to the events that were selected.

Next, the ten events that we had prepared were displayed.

"I am Sakagami, and I will be in charge of proctoring this special exam for you. So, without further delay, let us begin the final special exam for the first-year students. We ask that the representatives from each class press select five events and then press the confirm button."

I selected the five events Horikita had her mind set on and pressed

the button without hesitation. Sakayanagi must have finished making her choices for Class A not long after, because the results were displayed on the large monitor.

The five events I had chosen from our list were Archery, Basketball, Ping Pong, Typing Skills, and Tennis.

I'd racked my brain over whether or not to throw in an interesting event like "Rock Paper Scissors," but decided against it. I threw out the idea of using the English event since Class A already had something involving that subject, and also decided against Soccer, Piano, and Swimming, because even though Hirata and Onodera were skilled in their respective fields, it was very likely that they'd be useful in other events. Furthermore, Class C's strategy was to primarily focus on sports.

The five events that Sakayanagi had chosen from Class A's list were Chess, English Test, Contemporary Literature, Mathematics Test, and Flash Mental Arithmetic. So, we had our total of ten. Three of the events Katsuragi had told us he thought were sure things had been selected, after all. So had both the events that he thought might be runners-up after the main three: Flash Mental Arithmetic and Contemporary Literature. He was exactly right.

That being said, nothing really changed in the end. Because I deliberately hadn't told Horikita about it.

"Now, we'll be holding a completely randomized drawing to determine the seven events you'll be competing in," said Sakagami-sensei.

"You know, Ayanokouji-kun, I feel pretty sorry for you, having to go up against Sakayanagi-san. You have my sympathy," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"Hoshinomiya-sensei, please be discreet," said Sakagami-sensei.

"O-okay. Sorry for speaking out of turn."

For some reason or another, Sakagami-sensei seemed to be upset with her. She responded with an apologetic pose.

"The results of the drawing will be displayed on the large monitor in the center. Please take a look," said Sakagami-sensei, urging us to look at the screen, which was now displaying something new.

A 3D image flashed on the screen, followed by the titles of the selected events displayed. The first event that came up on the screen

was...

Basketball

Required Participants: 5 Persons

Allotted Time: 20 Minutes (Two 10-Minute Halves)

Rules: Standard basketball rules apply.

Commander: The commander can switch out one player at any point in the game.

It was a five-on-five sporting event. And it was an event that we had chosen. Meaning it was something we absolutely could not afford to lose.

“Sakagami-sensei, are students permitted to speak freely with one another?” asked Sakayanagi.

“There aren’t any rules specifically forbidding it. Please feel free.”

“So, we’re free to engage in a battle of words, then?”

Sakayanagi had directly admitted what her intentions were. But Sakagami-sensei didn’t object.

“Jeez, you’re so merciless, Sakagami-san!” said Hoshinomiya-sensei, probably seeing this as him giving Sakayanagi permission to launch into a merciless assault against me.

“Hoshinomiya-sensei,” he replied.

“Oh, yes, sorry! Not another peep out of me!”

So, while the students were free to speak, the teachers were not. Hoshinomiya-sensei got chewed out each time she spoke up.

“Well, it seems Class C has chosen to compete in a fair number of sporting events, just as expected. Considering that you have few academically skilled students, I suppose that’s understandable. And I’m sure Sudou-kun is your key player for basketball, hm? He is one of the best basketball players at this school. I have a feeling we won’t stand a chance of winning, with our inferior team.”

Sakayanagi offered me her analysis, apparently wanting to verbally spar with me, but I chose to remain silent for the time being. I wanted to avoid making too much of an impression on Hoshinomiya-sensei and Sakagami-sensei.

“Did the true commander, Horikita-san...order you not to say too

much?” asked Sakayanagi.

Once she realized I wasn't going to reply, she kept going.

“If that's the case, then whatever you say should have no effect on your selection process. Don't you think so?”

Sakayanagi knew that I was trying to say as little as possible when we were in front of the teachers.

“Horikita warned me not to say too much to you. She said if I carelessly let something slip, I'd just fall for one of your tricks and you'd turn the tables on me.”

“*Fu fu*. Oh no, that's no good, Ayanokouji-kun. Now you've gone and given me an advantage. You really should have kept the identity of whoever is controlling you from the shadows hidden. If you reveal that it's Horikita-san, then I can make some inferences based on her personality and behavioral patterns,” said Sakayanagi.

“Well, that...doesn't necessarily mean I'm getting instructions from Horikita, though,” I answered.

“Didn't you just say that you did, though? You just said Horikita-san gave you instructions.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei, seeing Sakayanagi chuckling at me, held her hand up to her forehead, letting out an “Oh, no...”

Sakagami simply shook his head at seeing Sakayanagi extract information from me so quickly.

“No, I just said that Horikita warned me... The instructions might have been from someone else.”

“*Might* have? No, no, you really should definitely claim that it was someone else, even if it's a lie,” said Sakayanagi, chiding me.

Not only had Sakayanagi seen through me, but she was going so far as to help me out. Our little back and forth was bound to have conveyed the overwhelming gap in power between us to the teachers.

Now that we'd worked together to fool the two teachers, I supposed, the special exam could begin.

“What's the point, anyway? We carefully considered the kinds of things you might come up with, Sakayanagi. And we're going to stick to that as we handle this test. You may have realized that Horikita was the one who came up with all of our plans, but all that does is put us on an

equal footing.”

“My, oh, my, you just came right out and admitted it, hm? But when was it ever established that *I* was the one who devised Class A’s strategies? Just like you, Ayanokouji-kun, I have as many heads to put together as I do classmates. Haven’t you considered the fact that we might *also* have run a series of calculations in preparation for this test?”

“That’s...”

A few dozen seconds had passed since we had been given permission to engage in a battle of words. Sakagami-sensei, apparently unable to watch anymore, pushed the exam forward.

“The clock is ticking. While I did tell you that you’re free to speak, please do not neglect the task at hand,” he stated.

Of course, my conversation with Sakayanagi didn’t have the slightest impact on my mental state. The only ones who were worried were the teachers. To Sakayanagi and me, this was basically nothing more than idle chatter.

Once we were both done making our team selections, the students who would be playing basketball from both classes were displayed on the screen at the same time.

The five students from my class were: Makida Susume, the ace player of our lineup; Minami Setsuya; Ike Kanji; Hondou Ryoutarou; and Onodera Kayano. Sudou was not included in the lineup. Also, I had included one girl. And, as mentioned earlier, our ace player was Makita. According to Sudou, if Makita practiced with the basketball team, then his skills should be up to par.

Additionally, while Onodera’s forte was swimming, it seemed her basketball skills were nothing to scoff at. Apparently, it was decided that picking her would result in the team functioning better than if we just threw in another guy with little to no experience.

Class A, on the other hand, chose Machida Kouji, Toba Shigeru, Kamuro Masumi, Shimizu Naoki, and Kitou Hayato as their five players. They had also included one girl in their lineup. According to the information I had from Hirata, Kei, and Kushida, our team should take the win.

I couldn’t clearly see Sakagami-sensei’s face, as he was standing over on Class A’s side, but I could clearly see Hoshinomiya-sensei, who

stood beside me. I could immediately tell that she was having doubts about my leadership. That was understandable, considering the fact that Sudou Ken, thought to be a shoo-in for basketball, was absent.

Of course, that was part of the strategy that Horikita and everyone else in Class C had discussed, not something I'd decided on. Though it was only natural that Sakayanagi would see through such a strategy.

“So, you're deliberately withholding Sudou-kun from this event and hoping to win without him. I see. Well, considering Sudou-kun's physical prowess, it wouldn't be strange for him to be skilled at Ping Pong or Tennis, too. Everything is still as I anticipated.”

If we'd played Sudou right away, we could've safely ensured Class C's victory. On the other hand, Class A couldn't have been happy about basketball being chosen in the first place, probably because they immediately assumed Sudou would be on our team. Honestly, if Class A went head-to-head with Class C in a game led by Sudou, their chances of winning were low. With that in mind, they would have wanted to avoid wasting their more athletic students on this event, knowing that if Sudou had already been put in play for basketball, they'd have an advantage over Class C in the events to come.

In light of that, Class C had deliberately avoided selecting Sudou for this event. If possible, we wanted to hold onto a valuable asset like Sudou, who could shine in any sporting events selected after this. If Tennis or Ping Pong were chosen after this, then Sudou's availability would be a major factor.

However, looking at Class A's lineup, it seemed they'd seen right through our hastily concocted plans.

“By the way, who was it who decided on the rules for the commander's involvement? That they may ‘switch one player’ at any time? Was it Horikita-san who thought of that, perhaps? You do realize it made your intentions quite clear to us, don't you?” said Sakayanagi.

“Sorry, but I can't answer that.”

“I see. Well, if you cannot answer, then I suppose there's no use asking.”

On the other side of the monitor, preparations were quickly underway. The game would be starting before long. In the meantime, all we could do was stand by and watch things unfold. The only thing we could do in this event was see how things were going and substitute

one player.

That one decision, however, could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Once the whistle sounded, the nerve-wracking 10-minute first half of the game began. Even though we didn't have Sudou on the team, Class C played on an almost equal footing with Class A at the outset. It was neck-and-neck. One side scored two points, then the other one scored two points, too. Even the teachers found themselves drawn to watching the game, unsure of who was going to win.

Makida, the one we'd picked to lead our team, wasn't bad at all. Even though he was nowhere near as good as Sudou, his skills were above average, and he carried the team fairly well as our ace player. Class A, had selected Kitou as their ace player, and he was keeping up with Makida, competing on even ground.

Once we got through the first period, the score was twelve to eleven. Just a one-point difference. Class C had just barely taken the lead with a single point.

"Quite a fascinating game," said Sakayanagi, expressing her thoughts.

It was hard to tell which team would come out on top. The second half of the game would begin after a four-minute half-time break.

Sakayanagi didn't move. Even though we had a one-point lead, she must have judged both teams evenly matched and decided to just wait things out. I, however, reached for the keyboard in front of me without delay. Deciding to swap Sudou in, I pulled Ike out.

It was certainly true that the teams seemed evenly matched at first glance. There was no way to tell how the game would play out, and as a result, I'd been hesitating over whether or not to put Sudou in over the past ten minutes.

"*Fu fu*." Sakayanagi let out a slight chuckle. It didn't seem like she was going to let us try and hold Sudou in reserve.

On the monitor, Sudou was warming up. It would have made sense for him to have some doubts about being swapped in at this juncture, but his expression was serious. Apparently, he'd sensed the same thing I had.

"The game's still an even match. No, actually, Class C has a slight

lead. Don't you think it's a bit premature, calling him in now?" she asked.

"I just thought I should make absolutely certain we pick up this win," I answered.

"Well, this first game is quite important, so I understand how you feel. And there's no guarantee whatsoever that Tennis or Ping Pong will be selected after this. If there is no event where you can make use of Sudou-kun, there's no point in trying to hold him in reserve," said Sakayanagi.

"Shouldn't you be swapping out a player, too?" I asked.

"There's no need. We went into this game with a winning line-up from the very beginning."

Kitou, who had been marking Makita before, was now marking Sudou. Sudou had been watching the game from the other room since it started. He should have noticed the gap in their abilities already.

After the four minutes were past, the second half of the game started. Kitou stuck to Sudou closely, and his movements were now twice as sharp as they were before.

"Damn, I knew it... You were holdin' back before, weren't ya?!"

I could hear Sudou shouting through the monitor. I'd known all along that Class A had been holding back to make us bring Sudou out. But there was no way for us to tell exactly *how* much they were holding back until I pitted Sudou against them.

Kitou stuck to Sudou fiercely, but Sudou was still a cut above, weaving through their defense and making it to their side of the court. The students from Class A desperately fought back against Class C, led by Sudou, to stop his advance. Even though Sudou was clearly head-and-shoulders above them, it seemed the Class A players were better than the other people on our team. The score was now seventeen to thirteen. The gap had widened.

However, rather than looking more ragged, our opponents were gradually playing smarter and better.

"Hey, Kitou! You do play basketball, don't you?!"

"No. You're simply being driven into a corner by a bunch of novices."

"You friggin' liar!"

"There's no need for me to lie. My teammates and I have only been practicing for a little less than a week. It seems like you're quite confident in your basketball skills, but you're not all that impressive after all."

"Screw you!"

Since there was no cheering, I could hear Sudou and Kitou's exchange through the monitor, albeit only faintly. Sudou, riled up thanks to his opponent telling him that he was struggling against a bunch of amateur players, was beginning to lose a little bit of his luster, his game starting to suffer.

"*Fu fu*. He is lying, of course. Kitou-kun is an experienced basketball player," said Sakayanagi.

Getting Sudou all riled up was probably part of Sakayanagi's plan. She had likely instructed Kitou to do so.

"If we shake him up with psychological attacks, Sudou-kun will break down. No matter how skilled he might be, if his mind is immature, it leaves a weakness for us to exploit."

The student named Kitou was quite good at basketball. He'd deliberately held himself back and pretended to be on even ground with the students in Class C, aiming to delay Sudou's entry into the game and stage a come-from-behind win. And, if that plan didn't work, he was going to try to win by riling Sudou up and breaking his concentration. Sakayanagi's two-part strategy had brilliantly countered our plans.

"We'll be catching up with you soon," said Sakayanagi.

Kitou sank another shot, bringing the score to seventeen to fifteen. Class A was on our tail. It certainly seemed Sudou's disordered mental state would give way to an even playing field.

However...

"You said that Sudou is mentally immature. When did you get that information?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Sudou had shown significant growth over this past year. So much so that his spirit wouldn't be shaken by something like this. He knew Horikita was never going to praise him for looking cool during the game—but that she would value him leading our team to victory.

"Oraa!"

“Ngh?!”

Even though he was shouting and grunting loudly, he was back in top form. Sudou slipped past Kitou and blazed down the court like a man on a mission. No one could stop him. He made a magnificent dunk, putting Class C further in the lead.

“Heh... I got a little hot-headed back there but... Ain’t no way you’re beating me.”

Kitou was good, but Sudou, having regained his cool, was definitely one or two notches above him.

“I see. So, he’s matured too, has he?”

Sudou didn’t falter again for the rest of the game. Instead, he skillfully pulled his team to victory. Eventually, we heard the sound of the whistle, signaling the end of the game.

“Oh, yeah! I did it, Suzune!”

Sudou pumped his fist in the air, striking a triumphant pose. He was so excited that you might think he’d just won a championship game or something. Still, I could say this win warranted being overjoyed, considering how much he put into it.

“Well. I thought we stood a chance, but it would seem his skills are superior, after all,” said Sakayanagi.

It seemed she’d been seriously trying to score a win in that first game, regardless of whether or not Sudou was put in. The final score was twenty-four to sixteen. The first event had ended in a spectacular win for Class C.

“Wow, who would’ve thought Class C would get the first win? I guess you never can tell,” mumbled Hoshinomiya-sensei, as if she were speaking to herself. She sounded genuinely impressed.

However, though we won, we’d ended up playing our trump card already. The moment that Sudou was put in the game, it had become an event where victory was absolutely mandatory.

8.2

THE SECOND EVENT was about to begin. The result of the drawing was...

Typing Skills

Required Participants: 1 Person

Allotted Time: 30 Minutes

Rules: A competition of speed and accuracy, focused on three categories of Typing Skills: Vocabulary, Short Answer, and Long Answer.

Commander: The commander will be allowed to notify the participant of one mistake that they've made during the exam.

This was also an event that Class C had submitted, a one-on-one competition. Apparently, luck was on our side. This event was suggested by the Professor, who was the best at all things related to computers in our class. In fact, he was in a league of his own in Class C when it came to typing speed. He seemed to be unquestionably fast, even compared to the national average.

That didn't mean we were home safe. We had no way to ascertain how many students in Class A had good typing skills, and just how good those skills were. All we could do was trust in the Professor's skills. Nothing more.

But there was a reason why we'd decided to go with this event.

"My, another interesting event chosen by Class C. Although it might seem frivolous at first glance, typing is a fundamental skill in the world of information technology. You might even say it's an *essential* skill. I suppose it's understandable why the school would accept such an event," said Sakayanagi.

Class A had a fundamental advantage when it came to academics. Horikita had probably wanted to choose skill-based events where academics wouldn't play as critical a role in determining the outcome.

"I suppose that everyone has one or two things that they're good at. It's difficult to conclusively say you're better than others when it comes to actually competing in a field like this, though. You must have

someone who claims to be quite confident in their typing skills,” said Sakayanagi.

Generally, students who were skilled enough to win in a one-on-one competition had a high chance of shining in other events, too. Like putting Onodera, who was a proficient swimmer, in play for basketball. At the other end of the spectrum, putting a student who was only good at one specific thing, like the Professor, in a one-on-one match gave us an advantage in future events. So, naturally, I chose the Professor... Sotomura Hideo.

On the other hand, Sakayanagi chose Yoshida Kenta. Someone I had practically no information about. For this event, we’d tried to limit the commander’s intervention as much as possible. Our strategy was to prevent Sakayanagi from butting in to the extent we could. The scoring would be handled by a computer-based application prepared by the school.

And the results were...

“Class C, Sotomura Hideo, ninety points. Class A, Yoshida Kenta, eighty-three points. Class C wins,” announced Sakagami after the exam was over.

A difference of a mere seven points. I honestly felt a bit of a shiver go up my spine when I heard those results, but I supposed a win was a win, even if it was only by one point.

“Well, even though we were close, it would appear we fell short. I suppose things aren’t so simple for us, after all.”

Class A losing twice in succession was an unexpected development, but in some sense, it was unavoidable. Both of those events were chosen by Class C, so there was hardly anything Sakayanagi could have done.

8.3

AND SO, Class C had won the first two battles. So far, in addition to having luck on our side, it looked like Horikita's strategy was coming together brilliantly.

There were eight events remaining. We would have loved to keep drawing from the ones our class had submitted, but...

English Test

Required Participants: 8 Persons

Allotted Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: Students will answer a set of questions within the scope of what they would find in the first-year curriculum. The winner will be decided based on total points.

Commander: The commander can answer one single question on behalf of a participant.

The third event was a written test. Something I'd figured was coming sooner or later. The crux of this special exam was figuring out how to win the events that your opponent had selected. If we managed to win this one, we'd gain an even bigger advantage than simply racking up another win.

I put together a line-up of students who were good at English, starting with Mii-chan. That being said, it was frustrating that I couldn't make use of trump cards like Horikita and Keisei here. Since there were three proposed written exams—English, Mathematics, and Contemporary Literature—distributing our limited number of academically skilled students got tricky.

Horikita's notes contained two strategies for the event that two written exams were chosen. The first strategy was to go for the win in both tests by taking a balanced approach with the participants. The other strategy was to lose one on purpose and to focus our efforts on the other. Sakayanagi had quickly settled on which eight students she'd be using, but I took a bit of time to think.

"This is the first time you've stopped to think at length. It would seem Horikita-san had left you with more than one option."

There was no guarantee that the mathematics test would be chosen later. But there was no guarantee that we'd win, either. What frustrated me the most, however, was that Class C tended to struggle more with English.

I had to choose between these two strategies. Either go with a balanced approach for both or lose one on purpose.

"Are you going to give up on English? Or perhaps...will you fight with everything you have?" asked Sakayanagi, unable to rein in her excitement.

It wasn't like I was afraid of losing here though.

"I know what you're thinking, Ayanokouji-kun. You're afraid that Class A anticipated your idea to abandon the English test and is preserving our strength for later, too. It is true that Class C might win if we use secondary participants for this exam. Discarding that opportunity isn't an easy choice to make, is it?" said Sakayanagi.

After giving it some more thought, I decided to give up on the English Test.

"In terms of global trends, girls seem to be more proficient in various subjects than boys, and they tend to score higher. English is one of those subjects. Of course, we're just talking about trends, is all. Just for your reference," she added, just as I was about to decide on which students to put in.

She was trying to put pressure on me by giving me extraneous information. At any rate, Class A didn't want to lose this test. They'd likely be coming into this with a capable roster.

After we both selected our rosters, they were displayed on the monitor.

Class C's eight students were: Okiya Kyouzuke, Minami Hakuo, Karuizawa Kei, Satou Maya, Shinohara Satsuki, Inogashira Kokoro, Sonoda Chiyo, and Ichihashi Ruri.

Class A's eight students were: Satonaka Satoru, Sugio Hiroshi, Tsukaji Shihori, Tanihara Mao, Motodoi Chikako, Fukuyama Shinobu, Rokkaku Momoe, and Nakajima Riko. While they weren't the best options Sakayanagi could have gone with, it was still a solid team. It seemed she was putting the information she'd mentioned to me earlier into practice, considering that six people in her lineup were girls.

“It would seem you’ve opted to give up on English and focus on the events to come. A passably accurate decision.”

I supposed it was safe to say that she had a detailed understanding of Class C’s academic abilities after all. Even though I had enough wiggle room to go in and influence one question, all I could really do was sit back and watch this battle unfold.

We were able to switch between viewing the students’ answer sheets in real-time during the test. I put my ability to intervene to use and helped with a problem that many students were struggling with. But the impact of my doing so was minimal at best. It would only influence the scores by a matter of a few points.

Everyone’s tests were graded immediately, and shortly afterward, we were given the final results. The outcome of the test was based on the total score of all eight participants.

“Class C, a total of four hundred and forty-three points. Class A, a total of six hundred and fifty-one points. Therefore, Class A is the winner.”

There was an overwhelming difference in our scores, just as I had expected.

“We only managed an average score of eighty-one points per person. Had Class C gone all out in this test, you might have actually stood a chance at winning,” said Sakayanagi.

She made it sound like there was an opportunity there that we could’ve taken advantage of, but it wasn’t that simple. It was probably better for me to consider it a win that we’d gotten out of this how we had. The courage Sakayanagi displayed in holding back her best students even after losing three events in a row was impressive.

Just as Class A was presented with their first win, selection for the fourth event was immediately underway.

Mathematics Test

Required Participants: 7 Persons

Allotted Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: Students will solve a set of problems within the scope of what they would find in the first-year curriculum. The winner will be decided based on total points.

Commander: The commander can answer one single question on behalf of a participant.

Another written test, right after the English Test.

“It would seem that your decision to hold people in reserve has borne fruit. I suppose you’ll be going all out, now. Or perhaps...you’ll wait for Contemporary Literature?” asked Sakayanagi.

I wasn’t even thinking about Contemporary Literature. I was going to invest all of Class C’s academic ability in this exam.

“Earlier, I had said that girls tend to score higher than boys, but for mathematics, it’s the opposite. Apparently, it would seem boys tend to surpass girls in that subject. Interesting, no?” said Sakayanagi.

No matter what ideas she was trying to plant in my head, it wasn’t going to change my lineup. My seven picks were: Hirata Yousuke, Yukimura Teruhiko, Ishikura Kayoko, Wang Mei-Yu, Azuma Sana, Kushida Kikyou, and Nishimura Ryuuko. This was the best possible team that I could get out of Class C. I couldn’t use Horikita and Kouenji.

On the other hand, Class A’s lineup included Matoba Shinji, Shimazaki Ikkei, Morishige Takuro, Tsukasaki Taiga, Ishida Yuusuke, Yamamura Miki, and Nishikawa Ryouko. Her team was mostly made up of guys. It was also a lineup of students with just as much academic skill as her previous team, if not more.

Before long, the Mathematics Test was underway. Unlike the English Test, which was a devastating loss, things went well. Yukimura Teruhiko—Keisei—took the top spot, with almost no incorrect answers. I gave Nishimura, the student I expected to get the lowest score, the headset. But it wasn’t like helping her with just one question would really change the outcome that much. And considering the fact that Sakayanagi would undoubtedly be answering correctly, that the commander getting an answer right was essentially a bare minimum requirement for this test.

After the test was finished, the teachers immediately began grading them. Since this was an event that Class A chose, if we managed to win this test, our chances would grow significantly. Then we’d be able to take on the fifth event with the possibility of going for a total shut out, winning the entire special exam.

“All right, I will now announce the results for the Mathematics Test. Class C, Six hundred and thirty-one points.”

Our average score was ninety points per student, then. More than satisfactory results. However, the test problems not being that difficult might also be cause for concern.

“And the results for Class A... Six hundred and fifty-five points. Class A wins.”

Sakagami-sensei reported the results. We had lost by a slim margin, a mere twenty-four-point difference.

“That was a close one. Everyone in Class C must have studied quite a bit. If you had included Horikita-san and Kouenji-kun in your lineup, you would’ve won, don’t you think?”

“...Maybe.”

It was a shame we hadn’t won the Mathematics Test. It was certainly true that we might have, had I put in Horikita and Kouenji. But it also wasn’t guaranteed.

This also meant that if the Contemporary Literature Test came up as the next event, we would lose almost automatically. There was no one left in Class C with the academic skill to surpass what Class A had to offer.

That brought us to two wins and two losses. We had lost the lead and things were even.

8.4

AND NOW, the fifth event was drawn.

Flash Mental Arithmetic

Required Participants: 2 Persons

Allotted Time: 30 Minutes

Rules: Victory will be awarded to the class of the student who places first in terms of both accuracy and speed, using abacus-style mental arithmetic.

Commander: The commander can change the answer for just one question of their choosing.

Another event that Class A had proposed, the third in a row. Normally, this would've been an unfortunate development, but this particular event was a special case. Keisei was probably feeling happy enough to start doing a little jig. This was the event in which Katsuragi had promised to take it easy on us.

However, it was still far too early to celebrate. If Katsuragi wasn't put in, then our chances of victory would go up in smoke, never to be anything more than a mere fantasy.

"Another Class A event. We absolutely cannot afford to lose this one," said Sakayanagi.

I followed Horikita's strategy and put in Kouenji Rokusuke and Matsushita Chiaki. I had Matsushita wear the headset. Even if Kouenji had it, there wasn't any guarantee that he'd actually listen.

Horikita's idea to put Kouenji in for the Flash Mental Arithmetic event was probably the right call. Victory wasn't determined by overall score in this event, but by who placed first. It was possible that Kouenji would rise to meet our expectations and give us the win, but in the event that he didn't take it seriously, we could use Matsushita as a backup.

She was a quick thinker, so we had planned to use her in the Mathematics Test or the Flash Mental Arithmetic event. But even if we'd used her in the previous test, there was no guarantee we would've won. I supposed you could say it was a blessing in disguise that we hadn't,

since it meant we could use her here.

The students Sakayanagi chose were Katsuragi Kouhei and Tamiya Emi. According to what Katsuragi had told us in secret, Tamiya's abilities weren't all that impressive, apparently. Katsuragi was the one wearing the headset, almost as proof of that fact.

"There will be ten questions in total. The questions will progressively become harder and harder, but they'll also be worth more points. In the event that there's a tie for first place, the test will be extended into overtime until someone gets a question wrong."

Numbers would be displayed on the monitor in the multi-purpose room. Since the commander could only step in for one question, we would inevitably do so toward the end. Even though the test was just about to begin, Kouenji folded his arms and closed his eyes.

"...I guess the plan backfired, huh," I muttered.

His attitude hadn't changed at all since the special exam began. Single-digit numbers flashed three times, for five seconds. It was a difficulty level of ten. The numbers that showed up were: six, nine, and one. The answer was sixteen. It was a problem anyone could solve.

The students wrote down their answers. Matsushita got it right without trouble, but Kouenji didn't answer, leaving his paper blank. Considering he hadn't even looked at the problem, that was unsurprising. It looked as though we could only hope that Katsuragi would make a mistake, just as he promised he would.

"*Fu fu*. He certainly seems like an odd one," said Sakayanagi.

Even though she couldn't see his answer, she could tell that Kouenji hadn't written anything down.

"But, since Matsushita-san is your actual contender, I suppose there isn't really a problem, hm?" said Sakayanagi.

As she spoke, the test continued. By the third and fourth questions, they were dealing with two-digit numbers, flashing six times. Matsushita was still unfazed and continued to answer questions correctly. But as they got to the halfway point, the difficulty level jumped. In the fifth question, three-digit numbers flashed six times, for five seconds. In the sixth question, three-digit numbers flashed eight times, for five seconds.

Matsushita looked like she was at her wits' end, frantically trying

to make the calculations in her head. She had managed to get all the right answers so far, and she hung on somehow, getting the sixth question right too. But that was as far as she went. For the seventh question, three-digit numbers flashed twelve times, for four and a half seconds. For the eighth question, three-digit numbers flashed fifteen times, for three and a half seconds. And the ninth question had fifteen three-digit questions for two and a half seconds.

“J-jeez, these are impossible!” wailed Hoshinomiya-sensei.

I could definitely understand how she might feel at her wits’ end looking at these questions, just as a student would.

“These seem like they might be far too difficult...” agreed Sakagami-sensei, not finding the answers himself.

Matsushita had gotten everything correct up until and including the sixth question. Unfortunately, she didn’t get the right answers to the seventh question onward. Kouenji hadn’t answered any of the nine questions so far. At this point, even if he answered the last question correctly, it wouldn’t matter at all. He had already gotten to the point of no return.

Naturally, I had memorized the answers to all nine of the questions. I was sure Sakayanagi had done the same. The commander had the right to change the answer to only one question. My plan was that if I couldn’t solve the tenth problem, I’d fill in the ninth. If I couldn’t solve the ninth, then I would solve the eighth. How much Katsuragi had purposefully gotten wrong for us would greatly impact whether we’d win or lose this event.

The tenth and final question was now displayed. Several three-digit numbers were displayed for 1.6 seconds, flashing fifteen times. The numbers flashed and disappeared in an instant, repeatedly, fifteen times. For a moment, everything went silent. No one picked up their pens—not Katsuragi, Matsushita, and not even Tamiya. They sat in mute amazement, letting the question pass.

Sakayanagi signaled to the teachers that she wanted to intervene. Of course, I did the same.

“Huh...? Oh, in that case, commanders, please provide the answer for one question. Of course, the later problems are worth more points.”

Naturally, the question I thought I ought to answer was the last one. Matsushita obediently wrote down the answer that I had given her

over the headset. She didn't know the answer herself, so she didn't have any reason to doubt me.

"Fu fu fu. Flash Mental Arithmetic. Quite an interesting game. This is the first time I've done it."

Kouenji, the person that Sakayanagi and I had already put out of our minds by this point, had apparently opened his eyes at some point. An amused smirk on his face, he cast his gaze toward the surveillance camera that we were seeing the event through.

"Ayanokouji-kun, what question did you provide an answer for? I chose the tenth question, with an answer of seven thousand six hundred and nineteen," said Sakayanagi.

The answer I gave to Matsushita was...

"The same. I gave the same answer."

Apparently, Sakayanagi had gotten the last question correct, too.

"It would seem that in terms of what the commanders can do, we're evenly matched here. Meaning this all comes down to how Katsuragi-kun and Matsushita-san perform."

As everyone's answer sheets were being collected, the man who had left all ten questions on his sheet blank opened his mouth to speak.

"The answer to the last problem was seven thousand six hundred and nineteen, was it not?"

"Well, well. That's quite a surprise. Kouenji-kun is correct," said Sakayanagi, offering him words of praise after hearing him give the correct answer.

The teachers hurriedly started calculating all four participants' scores. If Katsuragi had gotten questions seven, eight, or nine correct, we would lose. But if he had gotten fewer than six questions right, we would win.

"After tallying the results, we've found that the student with the highest score, with eight out of ten questions answered correctly, is Katsuragi Kouhei. Class A wins."

We'd hoped to take the win in our fifth round and gain the advantage. But in the end, Katsuragi was the one waving the victory banner. So, with Sakagami-sensei's declaration, the fifth event had come to an end.

“Quite unfortunate, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Was trying to win against Katsuragi a mistake?” I asked.

“It is most certainly true that he harbors much resentment toward me. It wasn’t wrong to try and take advantage of that fact. However, do you really think that I would carelessly overlook such a weak point?” she asked.

Even though I couldn’t see her, I knew that Sakayanagi was smiling.

“I gave him a message ahead of time. I told him that if he were to betray me, I would randomly expel some of the students who were earnestly trying their hardest in our class. He does seem to care quite a bit about his fellow students. He would never let more people be sacrificed to serve his grudge,” she added.

Sakayanagi had been around Katsuragi for far longer than I had. She was all too familiar with his strengths and his weaknesses.

“My, being defeated after you thought you would win must be extremely taxing, mentally. Are you feeling anxious about the final event?” she asked.

“Couldn’t say.”

“Still, Katsuragi-kun not taking your side wasn’t the only problem. Had Kouenji-kun taken things seriously from the very beginning, it’s possible he could’ve gotten a perfect score. Meaning, you might have won this round, yes?” said Sakayanagi.

“That’s all a big ‘if’, though. Having power you can’t control is as good as having no power at all.”

It was functionally no different from not being able to count on students who lacked academic skill, physical prowess, or other special skills to really contribute to your efforts. Students who took nothing had nothing to contribute. They might seem different, but it came to the same result. At least in this exam.

Of course, we had to assume some of the blame for this, too. We’d failed to persuade Kouenji to do anything.

And so, we were now at two wins and three losses. Class C was teetering at the edge of the cliff.

“Two more events and this special exam will be over. It truly is a

shame,” said Sakayanagi.

I could hear her let out a sigh. She must have wanted to enjoy this moment as much as possible.

“Now that it’s come to this, winning, losing, it all feels so trivial,” she added.

“In that case, I’d love it if you could give us the win,” I told her.

“Unfortunately, I cannot do that. This is a serious competition, after all.”

Sakagami-sensei kept things moving. The drawing for the sixth event had begun. If another Class A event was drawn, there was no way we would win.

Chapter 9: Class B VS. Class D

AS THE SCORES for the English Test, Class A and Class C's third event, were being tallied, Class B and Class D had already settled their fourth event.

"According to the results, Class B has six hundred and one points. Class D has four hundred and nine points. Class B wins the fourth event."

As Mashima announced the results, Ichinose let out a sigh of relief. This was an academic test that Class B had selected themselves, meaning it was something they absolutely couldn't afford to lose.

"Whew, you sure were lucky, huh, Ichinose? I mean, we just keep drawing events that Class B came up with," said Ryuuken.

"...I suppose so," she replied.

Even though Class B had won, Ichinose didn't seem composed. Ryuuken, on the other hand, seemed cool as a cucumber despite having lost. This was understandable, though. Of the four events drawn so far, three had been events Class B had selected. But those four events hadn't gone as expected at all, with Class D winning two and Class B winning two.

Class B lost the third event, the Chemistry Test, which they had selected themselves. And it left them really rattled. The reason why they lost was clear, though.

"Sensei...have any of the students who went to the restroom with stomachaches returned?" asked Ichinose.

At Ichinose's request, Mashima checked how the students from Class B were doing.

"No, those two still haven't returned from the restroom. Also, it seems several more students are now feeling unwell," he replied.

"I see," said Ichinose.

The reason why Class B lost the Chemistry Test event was because the students they were counting on to compete had unexpectedly fallen

ill. But that wasn't the only reason. On the day before the exam, some students had gotten into a fight with Class D students. It had impacted the test today, but although an appeal had been made to the school, neither class had been penalized. The school deemed it as nothing more than a verbal argument.

These underhanded actions were, without a doubt, carried out under the orders of the person sitting across from Ichinose. Ryuen.

She took a few deep breaths to try and calm herself down.

"Phew... It's okay. It's okay."

It wasn't like Class B had handed over the lead yet. Ichinose had been rattled when they lost the Chemistry Test, but now things were slowly starting to return to normal. While it was certainly true that fresh problems seem to keep popping up, it wasn't like Ryuen could do anything as commander that Ichinose couldn't.

Ichinose thought that as long as she fought the good fight, they weren't going to lose. She desperately tried to hold onto that belief.

"Yo, teach. Hurry up and start the fifth event already. Those Class B slackers couldn't even manage to keep themselves in shape for the day of the exam. Are you *really* gonna make concessions for a bunch of stupid, naïve losers like that?" said Ryuen snidely.

"Watch your mouth, Ryuen."

Despite Chabashira's warning about his language, Ryuen didn't seem to care. If anything, he got more extreme.

"Look, I dunno if they're in the bathroom or whatever, but seriously, they could be using this time to discuss strategy or something. And come *on*, multiple students getting sick at the same time? Sounds fishy. What kind of underhanded BS are you trying to pull, Ichinose?"

"I-I didn't..." she stammered.

Ryuen cast suspicion on the fact that several students had reported that they were feeling unwell at the same time. Even though Ichinose knew for a fact that there was absolutely no wrongdoing on their part, she couldn't refute what he'd said.

"Anyway, just hurry up and get on with it already," said Ryuen, looking at Chabashira with a big smile on his face.

"Well, Ryuen is right about that one point, at least. Mashima-

sensei, please begin the fifth event.”

He began the drawing.

Karate

Required Participants: 3 Persons

Allotted Time: 10 Minutes

Rules: Up to three minutes per match. Non-contact, knockout competition tournament rules apply.

Commander: The commander can call for a rematch one time.

“All right, a Class D event this time. Bring it on. We’ll take whoever you throw at us,” said Ryuen.

Ryuen chose Suzuki Hidetoshi, Oda Takumi, and Ishizaki Daichi as his three competitors. The commander intervention rules were just perfect for him too, as he could call for a rematch in the event that something unexpected happened and he lost.

Ichinose, on the other hand, chose Sumida Makoto, Watanabe Norihito, and Yonezu Haruto as her three competitors. She’d had the three of them practice for a week after they heard about the karate event, but they had their hands almost entirely full just remembering the rules. As a result, Class B suffered two staggering losses in a row. Even if she used her commander ability to intervene, it wouldn’t change the results.

The fifth event had been settled quicker than any event so far. So quickly that felt like it had been decided in the blink of an eye. Now that it had come to this, if Class B lost the next event, it would be all over for them.

“Pretty interestin’, huh, Ichinose?”

While they waited for the machine to draw the next event, Ryuen called out to Ichinose, who was now at a loss for words.

“Back when they announced this special exam and we found out that you were going up against us, I bet you felt like you were at a definite advantage. But now it looks like all you can do is pray for a miracle. *Ku ku.*”

Ichinose’s strategies were by no means simple or stupid. If this were a normal competition, Class B would be sitting at three wins and two losses right now. But there had been a sudden accident. And

because of that, things had gone entirely awry. If they didn't get one of their own events drawn next, there was no way they'd win.

The drawing for the sixth event began.

Judo

Required Participants: 1 Person

Allotted Time: 4 Minutes Per Match (A Maximum of Three Matches, for Twelve Minutes Total)

Rules: Standard judo rules apply.

Commander: The commander can call for a rematch one time.

A one-on-one event. For Class B, it was the worst possible event that could've been chosen. This was the first time Ichinose felt like she had been plunged into total darkness.

"*Ku ku ku*, judo, I see. Judo. Oh, man, getting *that* event, guess you're really in trouble, huh, Ichinose."

"No way..."

"I guess if the final events had been ones Class B came up with, you might still have had a shot at winning this thing, huh?"

Ryuuen selected Yamada Albert without a second's hesitation. Just like with the karate event, the commander rules were basically the ultimate insurance policy, which almost guaranteed there was no way for Class D to lose.

"Don't let going up against Albert get to you. Luck matters when it's actually time to throw down, y'know. You never know how it'll go until you give it a shot," taunted Ryuuen.

It was clear as day what the results would be. It would be extremely difficult for Class B to defeat an opponent who was on an entirely different level in both technique and physique. It was the one event that Class B had given up, and that they had no hope of winning, no matter what.

Ichinose had to select one person. She had only thirty seconds to choose, but now...she couldn't even come to a decision. The clock mercilessly counted down to zero. As per the rules, a student would be selected at random if the commander didn't select someone in time. But given the danger of this particular event, and the opponent that student would be facing, the teachers made a judgment call.

“Class B is disqualified. Class D has won four events, making them the overall winner for this special exam,” declared Mashima mercilessly.

The battle between Class B and Class D had quickly come to an end.

9.1

IT ALL BEGAN the day that the special exam was announced. Ryuuken headed off to lunch, and Ishizaki chased after him alone.

Class D had already decided to make Kaneda their commander, but they were having unexpected trouble coming up with events. The reason was that no one in Class D was capable of coming up with original ideas. Ordinary events. Ordinary rules. Ordinary fighting styles. They could only imagine simple things, things anyone might think of. No matter who they went up against, their odds of victory were so low as to be practically nonexistent.

Submitting such run-of-the-mill events was, basically, the simplest approach. The consensus in Class D was currently that they ought to avoid going up against the likes of Class A. Similarly, they decided they should be arguably even more wary of choosing Class B. Everyone settled on challenging Class C, who was on the rise. But Ishizaki railed against that idea.

“Hey, uh... you got a minute, Ryuuken-san?”

Though terrified of trying to talk to Ryuuken, he did so anyway... after making sure there were no other first-year students around.

“Huh?”

A mere glare from Ryuuken made Ishizaki freeze, like a frog being eyed by a snake. But even so, after a desperate struggle, he managed to croak some words out.

“Please... Give me a minute of your time!!” he shouted.

“Oh ho, so you’re a big shot now, huh?”

“N-no, I ain’t sayin’ anything like that...!”

“*Ku ku*, yeah, whatever. You’re practically the leader of Class D right now.”

Ryuuken felt like he was merely prolonging his sentence. He’d gotten a little extra time until he was kicked out, that was all. It did mean that he had some time to kill.

Ishizaki and Ryuuken continued walking, with Ishizaki trailing behind. Even if someone saw them, it would probably just look like

Ishizaki had called Ryuuken out to talk to him about something.

After they left the school building and made it to an area where there didn't seem to be anyone around, Ishizaki immediately got down on his hands and knees.

"Ryuuken-san, please, help out Class D...for this special exam!" he begged.

Ryuuken had had an inkling about what Ishizaki was going to say from the moment he first opened his mouth. But he didn't make a single sound. He just looked down at Ishizaki, prostrating on the ground before him.

"You're talkin' nonsense, Ishizaki. I've already told you, I'm retired. You think I'm gonna help you?"

"Look, I know that. But right now, we don't got what it takes. There's no way we can win against any of the other classes!"

"Yeah, you're probably right about that."

Ryuuken wasn't denying that point, either. He had already surmised that Class D was overwhelmingly inferior to the other classes when it came to their potential.

"Kaneda's gonna be our commander, so no one's gonna get expelled even if we lose...but if we lose this, our class points will pretty much be totally gone!"

"Well, yeah, I guess there's no avoidin' that after losing seven times," said Ryuuken.

Currently, Class D had three hundred and eighteen class points. If they lost all seven events in a row, they'd be down to only one hundred points. While that was just the worst-case scenario, it also wasn't entirely unlikely if they continued bumbling forward without a plan.

"So, what, you want me to be the commander? Who in our class would even agree to that?" asked Ryuuken.

"Well—"

In order to get Ryuuken expelled, they'd need to make him commander. And then they'd need to lose. But that would require the class to take a heavy blow just to get one person expelled. Nobody was thrilled by the prospect of such a tradeoff. If their class points were reduced to zero, then it would be next to impossible for them to ever

reach Class A. What was more, it would impact their chances of leading comfortable, stable lives here at this school.

Class D's first preference was victory. Their second would be to lose by a slim margin and get Ryuuen expelled. They just had to avoid losing their Protection Point and getting thoroughly destroyed.

Ishizaki, however, didn't want Ryuuen to get expelled. And at the same time, he wanted Class D to win. And if there was anyone in Class D who could make that happen, it was none other than Ryuuen.

"...So, what should we do? Should we go after Class C after all?" asked Ishizaki.

Normally, he would've been gunning for Class C without hesitation. But Ayanokouji was in that class, which made him hesitate, precisely because he was one of the few students who knew Ayanokouji's true nature.

"Don't just ask me for my opinion without gettin' my say-so. Who the hell said I'd help?"

Ishizaki was making a sink or swim plea here. He knew he was being reckless, but even so, he didn't get up off his hands and knees. He was prepared to continue begging like this until the moment Ryuuen walked away.

"Yeah, it's certainly true that Class C ain't exactly united. Sure, they've got a monster like Ayanokouji, but he's just one guy. You might think that you have a chance, since this is a team competition...but you'd be wrong."

"Huh...?"

Ryuuen, whom Ishizaki had begun to think he couldn't convince to help him, started giving him advice.

"Now, if I were commander, I'd avoid going up against Class C. I dunno what method we're going by choosing our opponents or whatever, but they ain't one I'd choose myself."

"B-But, other than Ayanokouji—"

"That ain't the reason why. Ugh, this is exactly why you're a total moron."

"Uh..."

"Even though Class D is chock-full of incompetent idiots, we've

got the edge in *other* areas. Class C isn't the opponent who'll let us make use of those gifts. No, no, there's only one class that is the optimal choice, as our opponent."

"Wh-Who is that? Is it—?!"

"Class B," answered Ryuuen, without even looking at Ishizaki. "If you're planning to win this time, then Class B is your only option."

A completely unexpected answer. Ryuuen had just proposed that they select Class B—the class everyone in Class D had said they definitely wanted to avoid.

"Even an idiot can be useful, depending on how you use 'em."

Ryuuen turned his back on Ishizaki and started to walk away.

"W-Wait! How, though? How can we beat Class B?!" shouted Ishizaki, looking up at Ryuuen, still down on all fours. "Ryuuen-san! Ryuuen-saaaaan!"

But his shouting did nothing to stop Ryuuen from walking away.

9.2

ISHIZAKI'S AUTHORITY within Class D wasn't exactly something to scoff at, considering that he was the one who defeated Ryuen, even if only ostensibly. That being said, his control wasn't iron-clad. The person who was supposed to have gotten expelled, Ryuen, was still here. The class had focused their criticism votes on Manabe just to scare her a bit, but she'd gotten expelled instead. Naturally, this made many students suspicious.

Of course, the first question everyone was asking was who cast this huge number of praise votes for Ryuen. Were there people in class who'd cast praise votes for him? And if from other classes, who then? Several theories had been repeatedly floated and then promptly discarded. Due to the high degree of anonymity of the special exam, Class D would never know the exact answer.

In reality, Ryuen and Ichinose from Class B had struck a deal, where she offered to give Ryuen praise votes in exchange for private points. That was what had happened—not that Class B would ever reveal the truth, of course. Since Ichinose had asked that it be kept a secret, her classmates were inclined to obediently follow her wishes. They would probably have done as she asked even if without a reason behind it, but since this was part of their strategy to prevent one of their own from getting expelled, everyone was more than willing to help.

Everyone in Class D, on the other hand, was thrust into a state of paranoia, jumping at shadows.

However, there were a few students who knew the truth. That would be Ishizaki and Ibuki, who had acted to prevent Ryuen's expulsion, as well as Shiina Hiyori, their co-conspirator.

It wouldn't have been surprising if the class had wound up stagnating from there that point onward, though. As such, Shiina had a very important role to play. She had faithfully aided Ishizaki in implementing the only bit of advice he'd gotten from Ryuen: that they go up against Class B in this exam.

Shiina, in a private conversation with Kaneda, subtly guided him to the conclusion that they should do so. Of course, it wasn't like that solved their problems. Shiina understood quite well that if Class D,

which had no leadership, clashed with Class B as they were right now, their chances of winning were next to nil. She also knew that falling even slightly behind would lead to defeat.

And so, Shiina immediately put another plan into action on the day the match-ups were decided.

“Damn it. Ugh, what do we do...?” muttered Ishizaki, at his wits end, sitting in a room at the karaoke parlor.

“I dunno. Okay, hold up a sec, why did you call me here again? And what the hell is with this group?” Ibuki glared at Ishizaki for a moment and then turned her stern gaze on Shiina, who was sitting next to him.

“We’re all Ishizaki-kun’s delightful band of friends. I suppose that’s what you could call us?”

Ibuki slouched her shoulders and glared at Shiina after hearing this silly, nonchalant response. “Ugh... My head hurts.”

“As the three people who best understand our current situation, I thought we would come up with some ideas. You know what they say, three heads are better than one,” said Shiina.

“Three heads are better than one? What, are we gonna headbutt those Class B guys or something?” asked Ishizaki.

“Are you *serious* right now?” snapped Ibuki.

“Ow! The hell, Ibuki, that hurt! Don’t pinch the skin on the back of my hand!”

“Now we look quite lively. Meeting up in a karaoke room was definitely the right decision,” said Shiina, bringing her hands together happily as she watched Ibuki and Ishizaki go at it.

“Yeah, there’s no way we’re having a discussion with this group. I’m out of here,” huffed Ibuki.

“Oh, um, that would be a problem, though. You see, I’ve called Ryuen-kun, so he’s coming here, too.”

“Huh?” replied Ibuki and Ishizaki in perfect unison.

“Ryuen-kun is absolutely indispensable when it comes to winning this special exam. After all, he’s the one who figured out our only chance of victory lay in facing off against Class B, when everyone else wanted to avoid them.”

Shiina had just dropped a bomb on the two of them. She didn't seem to understand the gravity of what she'd just said.

"What did you just say?"

"Huh? I said, our only chance of victory in facing off against Class B, when—"

"Not that part. Who did you call? Who is coming here?"

"Ryuuen-kun."

Ibuki looked at Ishizaki. Ishizaki looked back at Ibuki.

"S-seriously? Ryuuen-san's comin' here?"

"Yes. I asked him to."

"Wow, this is gonna be the worst karaoke meet-up ever... Okay, did you tell him about us?" asked Ibuki.

"Of course I did."

"So, wait, he knows we're here, and he's still gonna come...?"

Ishizaki had already tried to ask Ryuuen for his help, and been refused. His shock was understandable.

"Just out of curiosity, what time did he say that he was coming?" asked Ibuki.

"Four-thirty," replied Shiina.

"...Huh?"

Ibuki looked at the clock on the wall of the room they were in. It was already five past five.

"It would seem he's just a little bit behind schedule," said Shiina.

"It's been over thirty minutes, though! That's not being 'behind schedule,' he's just ignoring you completely!"

"Now, now, calm down and enjoy some melon soda. Why don't we just wait patiently?" asked Shiina, offering Ibuki a melon soda, which she promptly ignored.

"Forget this..." huffed Ibuki, standing up to leave.

Ishizaki blocked her path.

"I'm gonna wait for him. Ryuuen-san's definitely gonna come... Probably."

"Are you an idiot? That guy hasn't got a decent bone in his body."

There's no way he'd ever keep any promises, ever."

In fact, he was already quite late. Ibuki, done participating in this, started to walk away. But a slender, pale hand reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Let's wait, shall we? You know, Ryuuken-kun is actually a more decent person than you might think. Hm?"

"...What do you even know about him?" huffed Ibuki.

"I don't know anything about him. Honestly, I've only spoken to him a few times."

"Okay, then how can you know he's decent?"

"Well, I suppose it's just a feeling."

"So, it's not based in fact or anything. How sweet."

"You might be right," replied Shiina with a broad smile.

Even Ibuki cooled off at the sight of that smile, which was free of any ill will.

"Besides, it's so much fun to hang out with everyone. Won't you stay?" asked Shiina.

"...You're a moron," replied Ibuki.

Exasperated, she sat back down.

"If he's not here soon, I'm out of here."

"All right."

9.3

“**I**’VE HAD ENOUGH!”

Although Ibuki had been more than patient, it was now past eight in the evening. You couldn’t even say Ryuuen was late anymore. They had been completely and utterly stood up, and Ibuki was seething.

“I dunno, didn’t you sing, like, ten songs, though?” replied Ishizaki.

“I’m sure you can be patient a little while longer, Ibuki-san.”

“No! My patience already ran out a long time ago!” shouted Ibuki.

“Then, let’s do our best to give you more patience!”

“I’m not joking around!” snapped Ibuki.

“God, you’re so pissy... Don’t you get, like, tired of being so pissed off all the time?” sighed Ishizaki.

“One look at your face would make anyone a million times more exhausted!”

Ishizaki tried to grab Ibuki to stop her, but she shook him off and headed for the door. But just before she reached for it, the door opened.

“What’s this? Did you guys *seriously* wait around here thinking I’d show up eventually?” said Ryuuen, entering the room with a grin on his face.

Ishizaki and Ibuki both froze up, almost on reflex. They hadn’t thought he’d actually show up anymore.

“You’re late, Ryuuen-kun,” said Shiina.

“Well, sure, but it looks like you’ve been havin’ fun.”

“Yes. This is the first time I’ve ever gone to karaoke. I’ve been having a wonderful time,” said Shiina.

“In that case, guess I’ll get outta here. Have fun, Ibuki, knock yourself out.”

Ryuuen, still with a smirk plastered on his face, tried to leave and close the door behind him. But Ibuki stopped him.

“If you leave me in this karaoke hell any longer, I’m gonna punch

your lights out.”

“*Ku ku*. Oooh, I’m so scared.”

Ryuuen, having been pulled forcefully into the room by Ibuki, was then handed some sparkling water by Ishizaki. He sat down and began fiddling with his phone, saying nothing.

“...So?” said Ibuki impatiently, pressuring him to speak.

“So, what?” he replied.

“You kept us waiting for this long and you’re not even going to say anything?”

“I just came here to see if you were still waiting around for no reason, like a bunch of idiots.” He took a sip of his sparkling water. “No other reason.”

“Shiina made me go along with this whole sideshow for hours. I am beyond pissed.”

“Ain’t got nothin’ to do with me.”

“Yeah, it does!” she huffed, slamming her fist on the table forcefully, glaring at Ryuuen.

“H-hey, calm down, Ibuki. Look, snappin’ at Ryuuen-san’s not gonna do any good.”

“Christ, how long are you gonna be his stooge?”

“How long...? I... I’ve decided that I’m gonna keep followin’ Ryuuen-san.”

“Yeah, right. You completely and utterly *hated* following him around at first, though.”

“Y-you didn’t have to go and say that!”

While Ibuki and Ishizaki snapped at each other, Shiina went to pick a new song.

“You know that this moron over here totally fell for your smooth talk, and basically wasted his ability to nominate our opponent—which was a godsend, by the way—by selecting Class B?” sighed Ibuki.

“Yep.”

Ishizaki seemed to shrink. If he’d gone along with the class’s consensus, then he would’ve chosen Class C. That was the only opponent that everyone felt like they had a chance of defeating. But

Ishizaki had thrown a wrench into those plans, and now he didn't have the slightest clue how they could win.

"He's stupidly devoted to you. Meaning you're at least somewhat responsible, since you're the one who put the ideas in his head."

"*Ku ku*, guess there's no arguing that. What I said was careless," Ryuuken replied, still smiling. "Do you remember what I did to Class B at the start of the school year?"

"...If I remember right, you tried to split them up, to get them to stop being friends with each other?" said Shiina.

On Ryuuken's orders, Class D students had started fights with Class B students, trying to provoke the class into having a falling out. Ryuuken had started a number of such fires to verify the potential of each class, other examples being when he orchestrated the fight with Sudou, and the time he secretly made contact with Katsuragi.

"And what happened as a result?" replied Ryuuken.

"There was no result. Class B quickly became extremely unified," answered Shiina.

"That's right. They're more united and better at cooperating than the other classes."

"Isn't that why we should avoid going up against them in a team competition like this?" said Ibuki.

"I think so too. Goin' up against Ichinose and her gang of admirers is gonna be a huge pain," huffed Ishizaki. He and Ibuki shared the same opinion as the rest of Class D.

"Shiina, what's your analysis? Of Class B."

"Hm, let's see... Well, as they've already said, Class B is quite strong. All their skills are above average. More than anything else, though, I'm rather envious of how close they are to one another, but... Well, that's all I can really say about their class. They're not particularly a threat or anything. They're simply very close-knit."

"You've got a kind face, but your analysis is cold and brutal," said Ibuki, after hearing Shiina's opinion.

Ryuuken, after hearing everyone else speak, offered his own evaluation of Class B. "If you ask me, Class B's biggest flaw is Ichinose... No, it's their *lack* of a leader."

“W-wait, hold up a second. I don’t get what you mean. Ichinose *is* their leader,” said Ishizaki.

“Neither Ichinose nor Kanzaki are really natural-born leaders. They’re the kind of people who work to *support* a leader. Instead of putting someone like her in charge, they’d be way better off if they had someone like Suzune or Katsuragi. That’s exactly why even Class D, the bottom of the barrel, has a chance of beating them.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a terrible match-up, does it? Class D is below average in practically every category. In that sense, you could say Class B is the one opponent we should absolutely never challenge,” said Shiina.

“I’d argue that our chances are low no matter who we go against,” answered Ryuen.

“...D-do we really suck that hard?” said Ishizaki, dumbfounded.

Neither Ryuen nor Shiina changed their stance at his reaction, though.

“But...”

Ryuen picked up his now empty glass and looked at Ibuki and the others through it.

“With a little bit of trickery, our chances can go from less than ten percent to closer to fifty. Depending on how it goes, maybe even higher than that,” said Ryuen.

He took out a folded sheet of paper and handed it to Shiina. When she unfolded it, she saw the names of ten events, with five of them marked as favorites. As Shiina read it, Ibuki and Ishizaki leaned over to take a peek from either side.

“When the day comes, we’re gonna wreck ’em.”

“Wait, these are all—”

“That’s right. They’re all events based on making your opponent submit through force.”

Karate, judo, tae kwon do, kendo, wrestling, and so on. Ten physically grueling events.

“Hold on a sec. Yes, okay, there are definitely people like me in our class who can hold their own in a fight. Like, uh, me, Albert, Komiya, and Kondou. And then there’s Ibuki... but, uh, I don’t think the

others in class can, though?”

Ishizaki was saying that even though they could carry through in one or two events with the students they had, he didn't know if they'd be able to get through everything.

“That's right. Class B has no shortage of athletic kids, too. Sure, it'd be a different story if we could do all one-on-one events, but don't the rules about required participants kind of throw a wrench in that idea?” asked Ibuki.

Even if they left it all to the luck of the draw, there was no guarantee they'd get everything they wanted.

“Yeah, so what?”

“Huh?”

“You're too hung up on that 'required participants' bull. It doesn't matter.”

While Ishizaki struggled to grasp Ryuen's intended meaning, Shiina understood right away.

“I see. So, we should think of it that way, hm? It doesn't really matter how many people are technically required for events—everything comes down to the rules. For example, if we use tournament knockout rules, we could get by with one person.”

“Exactly. Say, for example, we have a ten-man competition in judo. Even then, Albert alone would be enough to sweep the other team.”

“But... would the school authorize that? Tournament knockout rules, I mean?”

“Yeah. It's probably impossible to put in knockout rules for stuff like written exams and or ball games or whatever. But in competitions like karate and judo, those rules are pretty par for the course. They couldn't say we were going way off the norm. As long as we use a rule set like non-contact, to tone down the risk of injury, it shouldn't be a problem. Even if the school rejects one or two of our events because they're too dangerous, we'll be fine as long as we get at least five,” said Ryuen.

“So, we can do this! With this plan, we can do it, Ryuen-san!” shouted Ishizaki, a glimmer of his hope in his eyes as he finally understood what Ryuen was getting at.

“Well, I suppose it’s certainly true that we might win every event that we submitted... But what happens if we’re not that lucky? What do we do if more Class B events get drawn?” said Ibuki.

“So, you’re not happy even with a fifty percent chance of winning?” asked Ryuuen.

“...If I’m going to cooperate with you, I’m gonna have to demand that you make sure we win,” said Ibuki.

“*Ku ku*. Of course I’ve got a plan for that.”

Right now, based on skill alone, Class D was in no position to win any events Class B came up with. Ryuuen was saying they needed another method to shorten the gap between them.

“...So, what are you telling us to do?” said Ibuki, who was now beginning to understand the situation.

“Sometimes you gotta sin to win,” replied Ryuuen with a smile. “You’re gonna stalk those Class B idiots every day, day after day, until the exam. Just stick to ’em like glue, at first. Nothing else. Sooner or later, they’ll notice we’re following them around.”

“Okay, what’s up with that? You think we’re going to stress them out just by doing that?” said Ibuki.

“They’ll probably laugh it off, saying what we’re doing is immature or whatever. As long as we don’t actually cause any harm, they’ll just choose to ignore it. That’s the kind of person Ichinose is. In the end, she won’t even notice what I’m after.”

“...What you’re after?”

“That’s just the plan for the first week. Once the ten events are announced, then we’ll really get things started. Any petty little thing will do. Take their seats, glare at ’em, tell ’em to shut up. Anything. Whatever. Have it at. Just don’t do more than what’s necessary. You guys know the perfect crew to handle this, right?”

He was saying that they should use people who could handle themselves in a fight, like Ishizaki.

“So...are you telling me that I should throw punches, if it comes to it?” asked Ishizaki.

“We’re just trying to mess with them, that’s all. Don’t do *anything* like threatening them or throwing punches at this point. We’ll save that

as a trump card we can use right at the very end,” said Ryuen, explaining that it was important they kept their actions vague and abstract.

If they went overboard and caused too much trouble, the school would have no choice but to get involved.

“The most important part is information. Through our countless little scuffles with ’em, we’ll extract information on Class B, and get a head start on finding out what five events they wanna pick on the day of the exam. I’m sure a class like theirs will come to a consensus really early on. And then someone will talk about ’em over email or text or whatever. I’m sure you’ve been doing that too, right?”

“Y-yes. We’ve also tried to find a good time to discuss which ten events would be good choices,” said Shiina.

“There you have it. Even if their lips are sealed, their phones are defenseless. I’m sure they’d never imagine someone would take a look at their phones without permission. And as the exam day gets closer, their plans will get all the more set in stone. We might even find out stuff like who they wanna have participate in which event,” said Ryuen.

“You make it sound so simple, but... Could things actually go that smoothly?” asked Ibuki.

“We ain’t gonna leave everything to Lady Luck. From here on out, it’ll be necessary for me to provide guidance on what you need to do. Anyway, the foundation for what we’re doing starts with you messing with them from tomorrow. And we’ll be doing things other than just stealing information. Like this, for example.”

“What is that...? Wait, is that a laxative?” asked Ibuki.

“Yeah. It’s a slow-acting one. The effects are delayed to start after forty-eight hours. If we can get some of them to ingest it, then we might be able to get one or two of ’em sick on the day of the test.”

“H-hey. That’s against the rules, though. What if we get found out?!” shouted Ibuki.

“So, what?” said Ryuen.

“Huh?”

“You really think I’m the sort of guy who cares about that?”

“Well, you... Yes, I guess not. You’re the kind of guy who would do anything to win,” said Ibuki.

“If there’s a problem, put all the blame on me when the time comes. Easy.”

Regardless of whatever punishment the school might impose on him as an individual, Ryuen didn’t seem to care at all. Even if the class did suffer as a result...well, they’d also suffer a crushing defeat if they did things the normal way.

“So, you came up with this plan because you’ve already made peace with getting expelled...”

“Earlier, you said you wanted to hold onto resorting to fights as a trump card. Does that mean you’re thinking of using force, in the worst-case scenario?”

“Yeah. Kids get in fights over the most trivial bullshit every day. What if the people they’re planning to use in their five chosen events just so happen to get taken out alongside the most useless lumps in our class? We’d probably be at an advantage on test day, right?”

Now that Ryuen had set his mind on this plan, he was going to show no mercy.

“I’ll be the commander on test day. It’s important I make Ichinose lose her cool.”

“You really are...savage.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Should we show ’em how Class D fights their battles?”

“Y-... Yes!” said Shiina.

“What the hell was up with that ‘yes?!’” replied Ibuki, letting out an exasperated sigh in response to how ridiculous this had gotten.

And yet, she found she didn’t exactly *hate* it. And she couldn’t help but hate herself for that.

“But... Why are you doing all of this, Ryuen-san? It’s not just because you feel sorry for us or anything, is it?” asked Ishizaki.

“Hm, who knows?”

Ryuen leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes. He didn’t really have any attachment to this school. He wasn’t lying about that—at least not at first. But now that he’d gotten this far, something inside

of him had started to change.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. Ever since he lost to him, the thought of leaving this school left him feeling dissatisfied. By becoming the commander and putting himself into this situation from which there was no return, he hoped to confirm whether this frustration was really because he wanted a rematch with Ayanokouji. If he really had no lingering attachments, then he could just select people at random and lose things on purpose.

But...if those feelings really existed within him—that desire for a rematch—then he would make sure he survived. Ryuen was curious to find out for sure.

Chapter 10: The Line Between Winner and Loser

THE SIXTH EVENT that was chosen was archery, a two-on-one event. Another one of ours. Class C had won thanks to Akito's efforts, making our score now three wins and three losses. Sakayanagi made no particular comments about this, but quietly watched the event play out. It was almost like she *wanted* us to get to three wins and three losses.

Up next was the long-awaited seventh and final event. And, through a mischievous twist of fate, that event was...

Chess

Required Participants: 1 Person

Allotted Time: 1 Hour (Going over time results in a loss)

Rules: Standard chess rules apply. However, the allotted time will not increase, even after the forty-first move.

Commander: The commander can give instructions to their respective player for up to a maximum of thirty minutes at any time. Time spent by the commander in this way will use up the allotted time.

There were no provisions to add time, such as Fischer Rules. This was probably a concession Sakayanagi had made to get the school to approve adding the event to the roster, as chess tends to take a while. A single match could take two hours or more, so I assumed the time limit was set to one hour for this same reason. That made sense.

"Three wins and three losses each, and now we're going into the seventh and final event. I couldn't possibly be any happier. I can't believe that *this* event was chosen as the final one... My, it seems that good things do come to those who wait, after all," said Sakayanagi.

She probably intended to intervene at a critical moment in the game and provide instructions to her player. Actually, we were most likely going to intervene at roughly the same time. Considering the rules for commander intervention, I didn't see myself beating Sakayanagi without giving it my best effort.

"Doesn't the fact we drove you this far into a corner mean that Class A miscalculated?" I asked.

“It would seem so. I must admit you put quite a bit of pressure on us in the sports events,” she replied, thinking back to the six we’d had so far. “However, the seventh event will be a little different. The commander’s abilities will have a significant impact on how this battle plays out.”

“I’m afraid I happen to be pretty good at chess.”

From this point onward, Sakagami-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei would witness our match. It was probably smart to take some precautions.

“My, oh, my... What a coincidence! Perhaps choosing chess was a mistake on my part, then,” she replied.

But first, the preliminary match was about to begin. A battle between the students we’d picked from our classes. I chose Horikita Suzune from the list of students who hadn’t yet participated in any events. Sakayanagi, on the other hand, chose...Hashimoto Masayoshi.

“Oh ho, so Horikita-san makes an appearance, after all. Even though she’s an exceptional student, you didn’t use her until now because you wanted to hold her in reserve until the final event, hm?” said Sakayanagi.

“There’s no need for me to hold onto my trump card anymore.”

We informed the teachers of our selections so that they could get the match started.

“Are you sure you don’t need to get a drink of water or anything?” said Hoshinomiya-sensei, worried that we hadn’t left our seats once during the entire exam.

“Thank you for your concern. However, there’s no need to worry.”

“I’m all right, too,” I added.

“Is that so? Well, all right then...” replied Hoshinomiya-sensei, letting out a sigh. The tense, strained atmosphere must be getting to her.

“It seems like preparations are complete. Let us now begin the seventh event: chess.”

At Sakagami-sensei’s instruction, Sakayanagi and I stopped our idle chatter at once. The stage they had prepared seemed to be in a corner of the lecture halls. A chessboard had been set there.

“Hello.”

Both Horikita and Hashimoto slowly bowed to one another. The final battle was about to begin.

A CHESSBOARD SAT in front of me.

A week ago, I didn't even know the rules. And here I was, right now, touching an actual chess piece for the first time in my life. Training with *him* online had made me come to understand the fascination and complexity of chess. If Ayanokouji-kun or Sakayanagi-san were my opponent, then my chances of winning would probably be one in a million.

However, the student I was squaring off against wasn't either of those two people. I had no idea how skilled Hashimoto-kun was, of course, but I couldn't imagine he held a candle to either of those two.

"Good luck, Horikita."

My opponent addressed me casually. Based on what I'd heard, even the students in Class A considered him something of a charlatan.

"Hey, come now, don't make such a grim face. Why not try to enjoy this?" he asked.

"Someone who spent the last year in Class A couldn't understand how important this battle is to us, in Class C," I replied.

"Well, it sure would suck to have a ton of class points deducted if we lose this. That much is the same for us as it is for you."

The class that won this chess game would get one hundred and thirty points. This really was a monumental battle. One that would decide whether we could secure those points to finish out our first year.

"By the way, do you remember my name?" he asked.

"I've never spoken with you before, but it's Hashimoto-kun, I believe."

"Oh ho, what an honor. I mean, they say Horikita from Class C is a bit of a celebrity, y'know? If I remember right, I think I first heard your name back when you really pulled the rug out from under Ryuuken during the uninhabited island exam."

I hadn't done anything back then. It was all part of Ayanokouji-kun's strategy, which he had carried out from behind the scenes. Well, no...I supposed he might not have considered that a strategy at all.

“Hey, I’ve only been playing chess for a couple months. Go easy on me, okay?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, I should be asking you that. I’ve only been playing for about a week.”

“Oh ho...”

The battle had already begun. Even though my experience with the game consisted of just practice matches, I knew anything said during this match could be a mixture of truth and lies.

Chess was a game where you and your opponent tried to keep each other in check while simultaneously exploiting any cracks you found in their mentality. The school was quite lenient about students talking to one another during this exam, with the exception of the written tests, where answers could be said out loud. Ayanokouji-kun and Sakayanagi-san, the commanders, had almost certainly been sparring verbally just like this.

And now that the score was three wins and three losses, everything came down to the seventh event. All thanks to Hirata-kun’s return, Sudou-kun keeping his wits about him, and the collective efforts of a number of our classmates. The issue of Kouenji-kun was certainly something I needed to reflect on, but that could wait for another day.

I absolutely could not afford to squander this chance and lose this battle. I recalled what Ayanokouji-kun had said to me before the exam this morning. A statement so arrogant it left me stunned.

“No matter who I’m up against, there’s no one out there stronger than me, even when I’m slacking off.”

While it was certainly irritating, for some reason, I felt like I could put faith in what he said. If Hashimoto-kun was no match for him at all, then I had a chance to win. For some reason, I felt like there was no way I could lose. I wonder why?

Even before the battle started, all I could think about was how it felt like I had the upper hand.



“We will now begin the seventh event, Chess. Both players, please take your seats.”

Following the teacher’s instructions, I took my seat. The smile never left Hashimoto’s face, but it didn’t reach his eyes. The outcome of this game would directly decide the fate of our classes. It seemed that Hashimoto-kun was feeling the pressure in this situation, too.

“Welp, let’s get started, yeah?” said Hashimoto-kun, picking up two pawns, one black and one white. “You know how to decide who goes first, right?”

“Yes.”

After I told him I understood, he closed his hands, the pieces hidden, and presented both hands to me.

“Left,” I told him.

Upon hearing my answer, he opened his hand, revealing the white piece.

That meant that I was going first.

“I’m lookin’ forward to seeing what kinda opening move you’ll make.”

“I’m not sure I can match your expectations.”

I took the white chess piece. This was the first time I’d touched one, and it felt nice and cool.

And so, the seventh event—the battle between Hashimoto-kun and I—had begun.

My first move: pawn to E4. Just as the game officially started, Hashimoto-kun’s smile had briefly faded. He moved a black piece: pawn to E5. I quickly moved my knight, planning to take his pawn. Through all of the games I had played with Ayanokouji-kun, this was the playstyle that I had the most confidence in. I would control the flow of the game based on how my opponent reacted as they tried to defend their black pawn.

“Y’know, I learned a lot from Sakayanagi, too. You think I’m gonna let you start the game off by putting black at a disadvantage?”

After those first moves, we both proceeded to make our next ones without spending too long thinking about them. The time limit was one hour. But Ayanokouji-kun had said to use thirty minutes, meaning that

was all I had. I had no time to waste.

As we played, I realized something. My opponent was refusing to play defensively. Sakayanagi-san must have taught Hashimoto-kun to play this way, as it didn't seem like a conventional playstyle at all. He was making offensive move after offensive move.

"Pretty screwed-up playstyle, huh?" said Hashimoto-kun.

"Yes. Did you inherit this playstyle from your instructor?" I asked.

"Yep. Sakayanagi played this way against me. I guess it's like, when she taught me, this one just clicked for me the most, y'know? But, well, yours is different from mine. Seems pretty solid... You self-taught?"

He was probing me for information. What was he hoping to get from my response, I wondered?

"I've been single-mindedly focused on playing chess over this past week. I pushed everything else aside."

"Huh... Wait, so were you confident that chess would get chosen as an event?"

"You're free to think that."

The position of the pieces changed at a dizzying pace with each move we made. At first glance, it seemed he was trying to keep me in check and box me in. But each of my moves was focused on encroaching on Hashimoto-kun.

"Did you really only start playing this last week?" he asked.

"You seem to love talking."

"Talking is the only thing I'm good at."

As long as he said nothing inappropriate, he could talk all he wanted, as per the rules. I had no right to stop him.

"That's right. Just one week. Of course, there's always the possibility that I'm lying," I replied.

"Well, if you really only have been playing for a week, then I can't imagine you're self-taught. You must have been drilled quite thoroughly by a confident chess player, just like how I was by our princess. Hm?"

"I wonder. I can't say, either way."

I had no intention of carelessly giving him unnecessary

information.

“Well, whatever. Hey, more importantly, can we talk about Ayanokouji a little?” he asked.

Was that okay? It seemed he had no real interest in my history with the game or whether or not I had a teacher. He’d just used it as a conversation starter, and his real interest was Ayanokouji-kun. So even Hashimoto-kun was starting to pay attention to him, hm?

“What did you want to ask?”

“Ever since everything that happened on the uninhabited island, I’ve been wondering if Ayanokouji’s really the one secretly pulling strings behind the scenes.” he replied.

He was trying to rattle me. This was probably one of the reasons why he’d been chosen to play against me.

“Why do you think that?”

“Just intuition is all. So, gimme an answer, Horikita.”

“Answer what? I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“That a fact? You look pretty shaken up, though.”

“When I learned you were going to be my opponent, I anticipated you would try to rattle me like this,” I told him.

“...Heh.”

“No matter what you do to try and shake me up, you’re not going to break me.”

I moved the white bishop in to check Hashimoto-kun’s king. His broad grin disappeared momentarily again.

“Do you really have the luxury of continuing this conversation?” I asked.

Now after, after keeping quiet for so long, I would begin launching my counterattack.

“Things are gettin’ interesting...” muttered Hashimoto-kun.

Next thing I knew, the tide had started to turn in my favor. He was by no means a weak opponent, but I’d seen through every move he made. Every single one was as I expected.

Not even ten minutes had passed since the game began, but his

hands had stopped. For the first time since the game began, Hashimoto-kun stopped to ponder his moves. The look on his face—the one so full of confidence that nothing fazed him—had vanished entirely.

“Whew. Man, you’re good, Horikita. You’ve got such a cute face, but you’re crazy tough.”

“You’re quite good yourself, despite your outward appearance.”

“Aww, come on now, no need to flatter me. I mean, it’s like they say, there’s always someone out there better than you, right?”

If the game continued like this, my victory was assured. That was how things were going. There was no way a skilled player like Hashimoto-kun hadn’t picked up on it, too. But...there was no way this match would be settled that easily, either.

10.2

HORIKITA AND HASHIMOTO'S game was displayed on the monitor.

He'd repeatedly made offensive moves at the outset, but Horikita had handled them calmly. She kept her cool, calmly avoiding being backed into corners that might make you reflexively want to use your pieces to defend yourself.

As the game steadily progressed, she gained the upper hand. They were approaching the midpoint, and Horikita's victory was beginning to look like a reality. Yes—Horikita had the advantage in this game. She was demonstrating a level of skill that far surpassed what I'd seen when we were practicing.

"Quite an interesting match. It makes me want to watch it all the way to the end," observed Sakayanagi casually, no sense of panic in her voice.

"I agree. Let's watch the game all the way to the end," I told her.

"*Fu fu*, yes, all right... Well, that's what I'd *like* to say, but I'm afraid I cannot. It's not as though I lack faith in Hashimoto-kun, but rather that Horikita-san seems quite calm and collected. His specialty, his conversational skills, don't seem to be having an effect on her," said Sakayanagi.

So, she was going in now, huh? A message saying Sakayanagi was exercising her commander's ability to involve herself in the game was displayed on the commander. She'd probably decided Hashimoto's defeat would become a certainty if she let this go on any longer.

Intervening before they even got to the halfway point was probably contrary to her plans. But her decision was the correct one. If she'd simply stood by and watched the game even a little longer, it would've progressed to a point where the outcome was pretty much decided.

It all spoke to how terrifyingly skilled Horikita was right now. I did feel tempted to just wait and watch her. I wanted to see how much she had grown. I was curious to see what kind of moves she'd make, playing against Sakayanagi.

"You're not going to enter the game, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

“We’ll probably have a better chance of winning if I leave things to Horikita right now, rather than carelessly jumping in myself.”

“I see. In that case, I trust you have no objections if I go in and turn the tides in our favor, hm?” she answered.

She tapped the keys on her keyboard. Hashimoto, who had been lost in thought for a while now, sprang back to life like a fish that had just been returned to the water. The commander’s thirty-minute timer paused the moment that they pressed the Enter key on their keyboard, probably out of consideration for the time lag before transmissions. The countdown would restart the moment their opponent made a move.

Horikita versus Sakayanagi. I was hoping they’d be evenly matched. If they were, it was possible Horikita might be able to ensure that her advantage didn’t slip away from her. But I doubted things would go that smoothly. Sakayanagi had entered the match with absolute confidence.

I could tell Horikita was beginning to feel flustered after seeing Hashimoto make a move she hadn’t expected, based on how the game was going so far. She stopped to think, pondering how to fight this battle when her opponent had been replaced with someone far more capable than she was. Carefully making use of the time she’d saved during the game’s onset, she made her move.

“Perhaps you didn’t provide her with enough time as a handicap?” said Sakayanagi.

Every time Horikita made a move, Sakayanagi took less than five seconds to counter it. She responded immediately, her moves targeting the chinks in Horikita’s armor. Any chance at victory that Horikita had secured was erased in the blink of an eye.

Now, only a faint glimmer of Horikita’s lead still remained. Her hands stopped moving. Even though she was a beginner, she could probably see what was happening. She was feeling despair, playing against an opponent she was no match for. She was being manipulated, backed into a corner.

Two minutes. Three minutes. Horikita couldn’t even move anymore.

This was the line. The line that separated the winner and the loser. Horikita was starting to feel the pressure. I gave her the signal that I was going to jump in and take the baton from her. I gave Horikita

instructions via the headset, with text-to-speech.

Horikita looked up at the camera for a brief moment. Then, she nodded, expressing that she would leave all the thinking to me. This was no longer a battle between Horikita and Sakayanagi. It was me against Sakayanagi. One on one.

“Now then, at long last...our match finally begins,” said Sakayanagi.

“Looks that way,” I replied.

I only had thirty minutes, but that was more than enough time to see this through. Sakayanagi and I continued talking while our hands flew across our keyboards, never stopping. We both spent from ten to at most twenty seconds on each move. Each time we pressed the Enter key and sent our instructions, the timer would stop counting down for a while.

Having watched the game to roughly its midpoint, I could already see how things were going to go from here. Our pieces continued to glide across the board smoothly, without hesitation.

“Whoa, hey, what kinda of otherworldly playstyle are you even using...?!”

I could hear Hashimoto’s voice over the monitor, as he cried out in response to the instructions he was given.

“Now it seems like our match was just pathetic...” said Horikita.

“...You got that right.”

Their shock was understandable. The difference between them and us was the difference between an amateur and a professional. They might not even be able to tell which side had the advantage or disadvantage by looking at the board. No... It was more than that.

As soon as I started playing, I was forced to understand something that made me gasp.

Sakayanagi’s chess skills were *incredible*. Enough to be genuinely worthy of my respect. I wouldn’t be surprised if she went on to make a name for herself as a professional chess player.

I had learned how to play chess in the White Room when I was very young. I had played against a number of instructors considered to be professionals. But she was better than any of them.

“So, what do you think, Ayanokouji-kun? Have my moves touched you?” she asked.

“Yeah. Painfully so.”

Even after the game passed the midpoint and entered its second half, rather than widening the gap between us, I was working as hard as I possibly could just to stop her from closing in on me. If I made even a single mistake, she would probably rush me all at once.

“Don’t worry. There’s absolutely no way you would ever make a trivial mistake, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“If that’s the case, it’d help if you just gave up.”

“I’m afraid that’s something I cannot do. If you aren’t going to make a mistake, I’ll just have to use my skills to break through by force.”

Horikita and Hashimoto had been rendered speechless some time ago. They were nothing more than the vessels through which Sakayanagi and I moved our pieces. Eventually, well into the final stages of the game...Sakayanagi’s hands stopped moving. Normally, I would’ve been able to intuit what move she was going to make. But... she was mysteriously lost in thought.

Since we’d been issuing directions so quickly until now, Hashimoto looked shaken. Sakayanagi wasn’t saying anything, but her silence might be precisely what made him suspect she was in trouble.

After a few minutes of silence, she made her move. And the move that she made after that long period of thought was an incredibly good one.

I’d made no mistakes. And I had no intention of giving her any openings to take advantage of. However, even so...

This time, my hands stopped.

“Oh, my, what a wonderfully fun time this has been! I don’t even care about the spectators anymore. I just want to make this the best game of my entire life. That’s all I wish for in this moment,” said Sakayanagi.

I didn’t know how familiar Hoshinomiya-sensei and Sakagami-sensei were with chess. Even so, they could both probably sense what an incredible game this was. One minute. Two minutes. Time continued marching on. I was burning through a frustrating amount of the time I’d

been saving up.

“What... What are you doing, Ayanokouji-kun?” wailed Horikita.

I heard her voice come through the monitor. She had been quietly observing the game.

“You only have about five minutes left...!”

I knew that. This was a complex game, where the thoughts of four people were intertwined in a single match. Horikita and I undoubtedly had the advantage before, but now, things were completely even. My next move would be the difference between life and death. No matter how much time I took to ponder this situation, it wouldn't go to waste.

“You're not the kind of person who would stop right here, at this level, are you, Ayanokouji-kun? Please show me.”

Rather than winning, Sakayanagi was only interested in drawing out the full extent of my skill. Things like winning or losing this exam probably didn't matter to her anymore, as long as she could enjoy this game.

I had less than three minutes left. The pattern I'd envisioned for the game's end was wiped clean, returning me to a blank slate. I started building a new path toward victory. Just before the two-minute mark...

My fingers tapped the keyboard, and I gave instructions to Horikita, who sprang into action like she had been waiting for me. The piece flew about the board with intense energy. Hashimoto looked flustered once again.

Things had been going smoothly for Sakayanagi so far, but she now took longer to make her moves. The next one took thirty seconds. So did the one after that. The one after that took one minute. On the other hand, I was only taking one or two seconds to respond. Sakayanagi and I were now walking, hand in hand, down a path that ended in victory for us. The endgame was approaching. The outcome would be decided before long.

Soon, it would be a checkmate. There was still a chance to escape it, but the options to do so were few. Soon, the escape route would be gone.

“Magnificent...” Sakayanagi praised me.

One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. Sakayanagi was lost in thought for the second time. Her time was running out. Each precious

second being lost, one by one. She'd been addressing me quite often until now, but now she was silent.

"Hey! Hey! Come on, come on!" shouted Hashimoto.

Sakayanagi had less than two minutes remaining. She finally had less time now than I did. Once she spent her full thirty minutes, she would have no choice but to leave the rest of the game to Hashimoto. Which would essentially make her defeat a certainty.

"Sakayanagi! Are we really just gonna lose right here?!"

Hashimoto probably couldn't see any way to get out of this. Sakayanagi had less than a minute now.

"Truly magnificent, Ayanokouji-kun. You have given me exactly what I wished for," said Sakayanagi. As her time continued to count down, she offered me a compliment once again. "Thanks to you, I've experienced what it's like to break out in a cold sweat for the first time. You are a formidable opponent."

Just as she finished saying that, she quickly added something else.

"...This is the end."

She muttered words of defeat. But Hashimoto wasn't able to hear them. The commander didn't have the authority to end the game. When the commander's time was up, control would be returned to the player, and they would be the one to give up. Or Hashimoto could continue playing until the final checkmate. In any case, the battle was over the moment Sakayanagi expressed a willingness to admit defeat.

"That was a fun battle. It really is such a shame to end it..." said Sakayanagi.

She had less than forty seconds. She spoke calmly. At the same time, I heard the sound of her keys clacking on her keyboard. Her words hadn't been an admission of defeat, but a declaration of victory. And they were followed by an intense move.

"...Knew you'd pull through...princess!"

Hashimoto—no, Sakayanagi, the one standing behind him—made a move that brought them back from the brink of death. When I saw the move that she had made, I felt the sensation of a shiver going up my spine, like electricity. Black had returned from the edge. They were living and breathing again.

Through the next two, three moves that I made, I felt the game veer off from the path I had envisioned. Then...before I knew it, I'd been cornered. I had been lured into walking down Sakayanagi's path to victory, without even realizing it. The tides had turned so many times during this game, but now, I fell silent once again.

With less than a minute and a half left to go, I was facing my greatest challenge. I had no doubt Horikita felt it too, as the one moving the pieces. She'd seen her opponent's defeat until moments ago. She'd seen Class C's victory within reach. And now, she was probably feeling those things slip away.

There was less than a minute left.

"Ayanokouji-kun..." Horikita called out to me, without looking up. *"I don't want to lose."*

She simply stated what she was feeling.

"I..."

Horikita was saying the things she wanted to say.

"I... I don't want to admit defeat... I want to win..."

She raised her voice. The emotionally charged cry that emerged was completely unlike her. It was a cry that came from the very bottom of her heart.

"Even now, I'm desperately trying to think of a move to win. I'm trying to think of anything I can. But I can't come up with anything that'll work against Sakayanagi-san... Only you can do that!"

I closed my eyes. I had less than a minute. This was the end of the line. The final minute. When I considered the fact that the match would keep going after the commanders ran out of time, it was fair to say that our defeat would be decided within the next thirty seconds.

There were no safe plays anymore. I had to gamble on a final chance at winning this battle.

I came up with my move. I quickly typed my instructions on the keyboard and hit Enter. The counter stopped. Horikita waited for my message, like she was praying. About thirty seconds after I had sent my instructions, Horikita's eyes widened. The long-awaited signal had apparently reached her via her headset.

I briefly looked over at the teachers. Their eyes were glued to the

monitor, both of them watching the game.

“So, you’re still in it, huh... Ayanokouji.”

Hashimoto looked up at the camera with a conflicted look on his face. It was hard to tell if he was smiling or not.

Horikita made her move and Sakayanagi’s timer began counting down again.

“Magnificent, Ayanokouji-kun.”

After seeing what I had done, Sakayanagi expressed her respect for the third time.

“I’ve never played against such a devious, formidable opponent before. You managed to match each and every one of my moves, and sometimes even surpass them.”

She must have been able to see the end of the game after seeing my move.

“That move you just made, Ayanokouji-kun. It’s flawless. There’s no doubt in my mind that you possess a level of skill no ordinary person could ever hope to reach.”

Her words were filled with deep emotion. Her voice trembled.

“...However.”

Her words quietly echoed throughout the room.

“With this, my victory has been set in stone.”

She typed her instructions on her keyboard. Hashimoto, who had been waiting, immediately made a move, following her orders. I responded by giving instructions to Horikita. The end was near. There was no more talk. Only the sound of the pieces moving across the board echoed throughout the room.

Five... four... three... and then, finally...

Checkmate, via sacrificing the queen. It was what you could call the ultimate last resort, where you sacrificed your queen, the strongest piece. When pulled off successfully, it was an exceptional play that led to victory. But it was risky, and if it failed, your defeat would be imminent. It was the move I had decided to make at the eleventh hour, when I had been completely backed into a corner.

Horikita’s hands stopped moving. In that instant, even though she

clung to the faint hope she'd hear me say something over the headset, she must have realized there was no way to avoid checkmate now. The match had been decided.

"Ayanokouji-kun..."

Even so, there was something in Horikita that just couldn't give up.

"Answer me, Ayanokouji-un... Isn't there anything else I can do...?"

I moved my hands away from the keyboard.

"Ayanokouji-kun...!"

Horikita ached to beat Class A more than anyone else. She had entrusted me with everything, thinking that if she did, she might win. This was the seventh and final event. I wanted to praise her for standing up against a formidable opponent like Hashimoto and getting the upper hand on him.

Horikita had done nothing wrong. She'd followed the instructions that I had given her over the headset. It just so happened that her opponent had made an even better move, was all.

The commanders' time ticked all the way down to zero, and communications were cut.

"...I've lost."

Horikita bowed to Hashimoto, but it looked more like she was hanging her head rather than bowing.

"Thank you."

Hashimoto bowed to her in response.

"...Well, that settles it," said Sakagami-sensei, who had been quietly watching the event.

The seventh event had come to a conclusion.

"The winner of this event is Class A. Therefore, the overall winner for this special exam, with four wins and three losses, is Class A. Class C, you put forward an exceptional performance, too," he added.

The chess game, the final event, was over. I would need to come up with an excuse later. I had intervened in the match as the commander, and we lost the game. I'm sure there was no escaping the fact that some people would complain, wondering why I didn't just

leave everything to Horikita.

“That was an incredible battle... Wasn’t it? Anyway, you did an incredible job, Class C,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei, trying to comfort me, as usual. “If you want, you can go ahead and cry on my chest, okay?”

“Hoshinomiya-sensei,” said Sakagami-sensei, snapping his colleague’s name in obvious irritation after hearing her say something so ridiculous.

“I-it was a joke! Just a joke!” she replied with a start, her shoulders recoiling a bit, before hurriedly bowing to her colleague. “Still, Ayanokouji-kun, I have to say you’re a much more talented boy than I thought! You got that ridiculous tenth question correct in the Flash Mental Arithmetic event *and* played an even game with Sakayanagi-san in the chess event. Also, you got the questions worth a lot of points correct on the written exam, too. Oh, and on top of that, you’re a really fast runner, if I remember...”

After saying all that, Hoshinomiya-sensei stopped and pondered for a bit.

“Hm, what’s *up* with that, anyway? Does that mean you’ve been hiding your abilities until now?” she added.

“Things just happened to work out well this time, is all.”

“I see. It just so happened, hm? Well, I suppose it’s true that things do just happen like that sometimes... Yeah, right! Yeah. I think I’m starting to understand the reason why Sae-chan has been keeping a close eye on you. Aww, this is so unfair.”

No matter how much I tried to conceal, there were some parts of myself I couldn’t help but reveal to the teachers.

“Don’t worry, okay? I’m not going to go around spilling everything I saw and heard here to the other students,” she added, rubbing my shoulder gently.

Then she leaned in close, bringing her face near my ear.

“You know, I don’t dislike kids like you, Ayanokouji-kun. But if I see you as an enemy, then I might come to hate you.”

Leaving me with those words, she walked away, the smile gone from her face. It seemed I might inadvertently have gotten myself labeled an enemy of Class B.

“The exam is now over. Students, please leave straight away.”

“Sakagami-sensei, should we return to our classrooms first?” asked Sakayanagi.

“No, you’re all done for the day. You may return to the dormitories if you wish,” he replied.

Apparently, there was no need for us to assemble in class again. Consider me grateful.

“Aren’t your teachers so nice? Letting you head back to the dorms already,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“Hoshinomiya-sensei, let’s get ready to tidy up.”

“All right,” she replied.

The teachers started getting ready to take down everything that had been set up in the multi-purpose room. The atmosphere in the room was so relaxed that you could scarcely believe such a tense, nail-biting battle had just transpired.

Sakayanagi slowly emerged from the other side of the computer. She had probably been waiting for the teachers to put some distance between themselves and us.

“Excellent work, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Thanks. You too.”

The first thing we did was exchange pleasantries about the seventh event. We had only spent thirty minutes on it, but we’d both been at full intensity the whole time. She was probably quite exhausted.

“Chess requires a kind of endurance. First, there was Horikita-san’s spectacular play at the onset of the game. And then there was your incredible playstyle, which surpassed even that. Truly magnificent.”

Sakayanagi had a look of satisfaction on her face. It seemed I had managed to bring out her best.

“To be honest, you were far better than I imagined,” I said. “You crushed the advantage Horikita had built up, and then beat us completely and entirely. Fair and square.”

“Oh no, no, it was quite an excellent match. It wouldn’t have been strange at all if it had ended with the opposite result. It could’ve gone either way, right up until the end. That being said, I suppose there’s no arguing the fact it was that one particular move I made at the end

which decided things.”

“Yeah, that queen sacrifice move was incredible,” I replied.

At the end of the day, what had happened on the other side of the monitor was reality. I gave instructions, as did Sakayanagi. Those instructions clashed, and as a result, Sakayanagi’s had surpassed mine. Victory and defeat were judged and determined at the school’s discretion. Even though we’d put up a good fight, Class C had lost to Class A, and we lost thirty class points.

Looking at those results alone, it seemed like a minor setback. But I had to wonder how the other classes fared...

“Is there something you want from me?” I asked.

“Something I want? No, not particularly.” Sakayanagi, smiling gently, gave a satisfied nod. “I was simply looking forward to doing battle with you. And that wish has been granted. I am content.”

I supposed it was a good thing I’d been able to satisfy her, then.

Sakagami-sensei might start watching us closely if we stuck around too long, and that would be bad. I rose from my seat. Just as I was about to open the door and leave, Acting Director Tsukishiro appeared in the multi-purpose room.

“Whew,” he said. “You really went and gave me quite the show.”

“My, my, if it isn’t Acting Director Tsukishiro. Did you happen to watch the special exam?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Yes, I did. It’s our duty as school officials to make sure there’s no unfairness, you know. I was watching you from another room. I saw your involvement as commanders and how the events unfolded.” He clapped his hands together and proceeded to praise us. “Really, that was the exact definition of an evenly matched battle. Neither side gave a single inch, and we, the school officials, got some great data out of it all. We’re confident this competition will be an incredible asset in years to come.”



When my eyes met Acting Director Tsukishiro's, I noticed him looking at me with amusement. That was enough. I understood everything without the need for a single word.

"I'm glad we were able to satisfy you, Acting Director Tsukishiro," said Sakayanagi, bowing.

More than anything else, she felt a sense of fulfillment now that our battle had been settled. "That reminds me, has the competition between Class B and Class D reached its conclusion?"

"Yes. They finished about an hour ago," he replied.

A fairly quick resolution.

"Which class won?" It seemed Sakayanagi was interested in hearing the results, too.

"Class D, with five wins and two losses. It was a real surprise victory."

Ryuuen had defeated Ichinose, huh? That meant a change of 190 points. Which meant that Class D—or rather, the original Class C—had come back to life.

And that, in turn, meant that we were now starting over again as Class D.

"It sounds like Ichinose-san has suffered a painful defeat. Well, it's understandable," said Sakayanagi.

If Ryuuen hadn't been here, Class B would've won. Did he act for his own sake? Or for that of his class?

Whatever the case, this meant something was changing within him—and that a looming threat had returned to hang over Ichinose's head.

"All right, everyone, let's clear out of here, please. The special exam is now over. Teachers, I'd like to ask you to leave, too," Acting Director Tsukishiro urged.

"But we still need to take care of—"

"We will handle that on our end," said Tsukishiro, interrupting him.

At his signal, a number of workers poured into the room.

"Who are these people? They aren't affiliated with the school, are

they?” asked Sakagami-sensei, sounding doubtful.

“It would seem that the government wishes to get their hands on this exam data as soon as possible. To that end, they have dispatched these fine fellows. Please, rest easy.”

Since this was coming from the acting director, Sakagami-sensei, an instructor, had no choice but to back off. The two teachers hurriedly finished up their tasks and left the multi-purpose room together with Sakayanagi and I. They left for the faculty lounge, walking away without paying us any mind.

Sakayanagi, on the other hand, glanced suspiciously at the workers. But the door to the multi-purpose room was promptly shut, followed by the sound of someone carefully locking it.

“Is something bothering you?” asked Acting Director Tsukishiro, aiming his question at Sakayanagi. He hadn’t stayed back in the multi-purpose room with the workers.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“I see.”

Well then... Guess I should be heading back. When I checked my phone, I saw a message from Horikita.

“Good work.”

What a short message. I was probably going to hear some discontented grumbling from her later.

“See you, Sakayanagi.”

I made to go, leaving her with those casual parting words, but...

“...Would you mind waiting for just a moment, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked, calling out to me as I was walking down the hallway, stopping me in my tracks.

“What’s up?”

She should have been basking in the afterglow of her victory. Instead, it looked like a cloud had come over her.

“...Do you really think the last move you made was the best option available to you?” she asked me.

The tail end of our game. She seemed to have some doubts about the conclusion I’d come to after much thought.

“The truth is you won. What else is there?” I asked.

“No... I’m sorry. I suppose I was just imagining something silly.”

“Aren’t you glad that you beat me?”

“It’s not like that. It’s just...well, deep down, I might have been hoping I would lose to you.”

Not for the first time, I thought her mind really worked in unusual ways.

“Just for the record, I didn’t go easy on you,” I told her.

“Yes. I know.”

Even so, Sakayanagi didn’t seem entirely convinced. Maybe the image she had of me in her mind was greater than what I saw when I looked at myself.

“You are a cruel person, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Acting Director Tsukishiro, inserting himself into our conversation.

He’d been standing near the door to the multi-purpose room. Sakayanagi turned around, and moments after, I had no choice but to turn and look, too. He started to walk toward us with a gentle smile on his face.

“You are a cruel person,” he repeated.

“What do you mean by that, Acting Director Tsukishiro?”

It wasn’t me who asked that, but Sakayanagi.

“How about you answer that one?” he replied, directing attention back to me.

“What are you talking about?”

“Why don’t you just answer her honestly?”

He must have had some free time after finishing up his “business” in the multi-purpose room.

“The truth is, Ayanokouji-kun should have won that competition,” he added.

I really wished he hadn’t said that. But now that he had, there was no way Sakayanagi wouldn’t bite. Why would this man deliberately risk bringing something on me to say that?

“What are you talking about? The truth is that I just lost,” I told

him.

“Yes. That’s true. You certainly did.” Acting Director Tsukishiro chose his words in a way that communicated his personality. “But I suppose the way in which you did it was different... Right?”

Sakayanagi, who had been listening in silence, began to understand. Then, she realized what happened.

“How foolish... Did the school forcibly intervene in a students’ exam?” she asked.

She didn’t sound disheartened or discouraged, but rather, indignant. Sakayanagi was, without a doubt, furious.

“You really are useless, Sakayanagi-san. You didn’t follow my instructions, and ended up giving Ayanokouji-kun a Protection Point. I had no choice but to use somewhat *forceful* methods in order to take that away from him, didn’t I? This is still a ‘school,’ more or less, no?” he replied.

So this had been nothing more than a pointless diversion. All for the purpose of purging the current administration.

“Ugh, for crying out loud. If everything had gone according to plan, we would’ve gotten Ayanokouji-kun expelled this time around. But it seems there’re quite a few overzealous teachers at this school, and they’re giving me quite a bit of trouble.”

During our game, there had been a number of instructions I’d issued to Horikita after a lengthy period of consideration. But even after inputting everything on the keyboard and pressing enter, there was almost a thirty-second delay before the instructions were received. Up until that point, the time lag before my instructions were received had only been about ten seconds.

This was because my instructions were tampered with. They were manipulated in the computer, so what I inputted and what came out were different. The automated voice played the tampered instructions over the intercom to Horikita instead.

“He was planning to use a different move, at the time. An even better move than the best one we could’ve come up with. I had a significant number of personnel and even a dedicated machine in place, and we were still forced into making an extremely difficult decision.”

If they’d made an overtly careless move, it would’ve been obvious

to anyone watching that something was off. To avoid that happening, he'd been forced to come up with a complex move.

"In that sense, Sakayanagi-san did a marvelous job seeing through the move we came up with," he added.

That was hardly praise, at this point.

"Why didn't you say anything, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Even if he did, it would've been pointless. No—it's more that he *couldn't* say anything at all," Tsukishiro explained. "It's simple, really. As a former inhabitant of the White Room, and moreover, as someone who forcibly inserted himself into this school, he doesn't want to draw attention to himself."

If word got out that Tsukishiro had interfered with me, it would cause me some major headaches down the line. Frustrating as it was, I had no choice but to grin and bear it.

"Pathetic as it might be, a victory is still a victory. Shouldn't you be happy?"

"...You are quite good at provocation, Acting Director. However... you do realize that you'll pay dearly for this, yes?"

Acting Director Tsukishiro merely applauded once more at the sight of upon seeing Sakayanagi's anger-filled smile.

"You do say some *very* amusing things for a mere child, someone in her first year of high school. Have you gotten a big head simply because you're, as they say, the queen bee here?"

A student sharing a ring with Sakayanagi really wouldn't want to make an enemy of her. But to this man, she probably just looked like a child who talked big. Nothing more.

"If you wish to make me pay dearly, then please go ahead and do something about it now. Quickly now, come on."

There was no way that was happening. A brief silence had passed.

"Well, then, I suppose it's time I make my exit. Adults do have quite a few responsibilities to keep us busy, after all."

Acting Director Tsukishiro then walked forward, deliberately wedging his way between Sakayanagi and me as he went past.

"Oh, and if possible, please do choose to drop out voluntarily.

That way, we can settle things without getting any other students getting caught up in this,” he added.

He kept going down the hall, leaving me with that parting shot. Sakayanagi slowly started to walk away, too.

“Now everything’s been completely ruined. How incredibly unpleasant.”

“Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Ayanokouji-kun. I’m just disappointed by what happened when an adult interfered with the affairs of children, is all. He just trampled on my most wonderful memory.”

She didn’t seem to care that her victory had been tainted, only that our competition had been interfered with.

“But...don’t you think it unreasonable to expect me to be satisfied with this?” she asked, stopping in her tracks and looking up at me.

“I suppose so. Yeah, you’re probably right about that.”

I had intended to be quiet about Acting Director Tsukishiro’s interference, but in the end, it might actually be a good thing that Sakayanagi had found out. Deep down, I was also bothered by what had happened. Even if only a little.

“So please, let us continue our competition. Let us pick back up from before the acting director screwed everything up,” said Sakayanagi.

It would be easy for me to refuse her request. But I felt like it would break something inside her if I did that. And maybe something in me, too.

“I have no reason to refuse, I guess. But where should we do this?” I asked.

“Did you know that there’s a chessboard in the library?”

“Nope... First time I’ve heard about it.”

“I occasionally play on it. Let’s use that for our game.”

We headed over to the library. There was no one there today, most likely because the special exam had ended and all classes were done for the day. Inside that entirely still, quiet library, I took the chessboard in my hands and placed it on a small table that two people

could fit at. Sakayanagi adeptly arranged the pieces to match how they'd been near the end of our game.

“Now, then, we're in the same position as we were then. Please show me the move that you were really going to make.”

I picked up my piece and placed it where it was supposed to have gone.

OUR GAME RESUMED and time marched on, with neither of us saying a word to the other. It was evening now, and only the clacking sounds of the white and black chess pieces could be heard in the library. It didn't last long, though. There was no need to spend too much time on a game we'd picked up from a point when it was nearly over. Before long, the match came to an end.

Sakayanagi let out a quiet sigh while looking at the board. There was no longer any way for her to avoid being put in check.

"Just as I'd expect of you, Ayanokouji-kun. It seems I've lost this game."

It was the kind of game where every single move we made was the difference between life and death. Sakayanagi didn't seem displeased at all. In fact, she acknowledged her defeat with an air of satisfaction.

"You're pretty upfront about how you feel."

"Do I look like a woman too proud to admit her own defeat?" she asked.

Honestly, I'd probably be lying if I said I couldn't see it...

"I wanted to know which of us stood on top. I would never do something like whine and complain about the result."

"But even though I might have won, this is just a replay of that game, at best. There's no guarantee it would have gone the same way back then."

I couldn't dismiss the possibility that the moves I'd ultimately come up with were things I'd thought of in the extra time I had been given. But more importantly...

"This outcome was a result of the advantage Horikita created when she was playing against Hashimoto. The way I see it, that means I held that advantage when I took over for her. So I don't think we were really playing on even ground."

The game had unfolded the way it did precisely because Horikita had pulled our side ahead and then passed that advantage to me.

Sakayanagi's ability to turn the tide when handed a disadvantageous situation was testament to her skill. If we were to play again, there was no guarantee that I'd win. She was skilled enough that if she *did* propose we play again, I'd be tempted to turn her down and run away for real.

"Are you trying to console me?" Sakayanagi giggled. She must have found what I said strange.

"No, it's not like that. I was just stating the facts, objectively."

"I'm satisfied with these results. Isn't that enough?" she replied.

If she was satisfied, then I supposed it was fine. But it didn't make me feel better.

"When the special exam was announced, you could've focused on getting me to compete directly with you in a one-on-one event. If you'd suggested something like that, I would have had no choice but to accept. But you didn't. Why not?" I asked.

Of course, the seven events that were chosen from the ten possibilities were randomly selected. There was no guarantee such an event would have been chosen. But even so, if we'd both come to an agreement about a one-on-one event, then such an event would have had a higher chance of coming to fruition.

"The reason is simple," she replied. "As I'm sure you've already surmised, Ayanokouji-kun, there was no guarantee such an event would be drawn. And if you carelessly competed against me one-on-one, it would undoubtedly cause the people around you to grow suspicious. I wanted to avoid that. Though the acting director took advantage of it all, in the end..."

Sakayanagi had done her best to consider and accommodate my circumstances when she made her plans for this special exam. That was probably exactly why she was so irritated by Tsukishiro's interference. I could go so far as to guess that the seven events chosen today, and the order in which they were chosen, were most likely not random at all. There was no way we could've had a fair fight.

"Besides, Hashimoto-kun is regarded as the most talented chess player in Class A, and he was losing to Horikita-san, who was taught by you. Which means I lost in that regard, as well."

Sakayanagi slowly bowed to me.

“Ayanokouji-kun. I’m glad I was able to do battle with you. The answer is clear to me now. You are, without a doubt, a genius. You are by no means a fake.”

“You’re not thinking about a rematch?” I asked.

“Do you want me to?”

“...No, I don’t.”

“*Fu fu*, you’re an honest one.”

We’d only been able to have this quiet game because we were in the midst of an extremely rare moment. It was precisely because the special exam was over now and the long vacation was starting tomorrow that we could find an empty space with no one else around.

“As for the reason why I’m not going to seek a rematch... To be honest, it’s because I’ve determined that our chess skills are about even. If we played ten games for fun, it wouldn’t be surprising if we each ended up with five wins and five losses. Am I wrong in making this assessment?” she asked.

“Nah, it’s accurate.”

If we were to compete against each other again and again, things would play out just as Sakayanagi said they would. We were evenly matched in ability, which was interesting.

“However, I have a feeling you had the upper hand in our first game. Now that I think back to it...I might have been losing. Well, I suppose you’ve been playing chess a little bit longer than me, Ayanokouji-kun. I’m sure that made a difference.”

Judging from the look on her face, she had a bit of a competitive streak. It sounded like winning was important to her.

“Besides, if I sought a chess rematch to try and win against you, I’d no longer be playing for the fun of it. Chess is a fun pastime for me. I wish to keep it that way,” she added, picking up a knight.

“You mentioned my history with the game. I’m guessing that means you did see me before, after all.”

“Yes. I was watching you, Ayanokouji-kun, while you overwhelmed your opponents in the White Room. Ever since then, I became fond of playing chess. I believed that a day would come when I would get to play against you.”

So the feeling I had when I saw the list of proposed events from Class A had been right. It wasn't mere coincidence that chess had been chosen as one of their events.

"Now then... I suppose it's about time for us to be going, yes?"

"I'll tidy things up. Sit tight for a minute."

"Thank you very much. I will gladly accept your kind offer."

I put the board and pieces back where they originally belonged.

"Unfortunately, I will be keeping some distance from you from now on, Ayanokouji-kun. Our classmates may become suspicious if I continue to fixate on you forever. But more importantly..."

"More importantly?"

"I've been dying to get to know you. I feel like you're a childhood friend whom I've been chasing for the longest time but haven't had the chance to actually meet. If we can compete against one another so easily, then I feel like the value of doing so will be diminished," she replied.

She looked at me and smiled sweetly.

"Though when you factor in Acting Director Tsukishiro, I suppose we don't have time for students to be fighting with one another."

Talk about getting your priorities backward. Normally, this school *wanted* students to compete with each other. But even if Sakayanagi and I did compete in a similar fashion again, we couldn't say for certain that he wouldn't interfere once more. In fact, he'd probably do anything he could to sabotage me.

In that respect, I supposed I was grateful I didn't have to be on alert for other things, aside from him. It would be incredibly exhausting to be surrounded by enemies on all sides.

Sakayanagi and I left the library.

"Come to think of it, this is the first time the two of us have walked back to the dormitories together like this, isn't it?"

"Now that you mention it, yeah."

Sakayanagi always had people with her. On top of that, the thought of us walking side by side was normally unimaginable.

"I'm sorry, I'm quite a slow walker."

“You don’t have to apologize for that.”

She was certainly slow. It was because of her disability, though. And oddly enough, I was grateful for that today. If I walked at my usual pace, I would’ve reached the dorms in no time.

“What will you do now?” she asked.

“Wait and see what Tsukishiro does, I guess. Even if he’s just the ‘acting’ director, I probably can’t slip just anything by him.”

“I suppose you’re right. Given the current state of things, it doesn’t seem like getting my father reinstated will be easy.”

“What about you? What are you planning to do?” I asked.

When I asked her that question, she stopped to think for a moment.

“I suppose I’ll continue to enjoy myself for now, as I’ve been doing so far. If Katsuragi-kun tries to rebel against me, I will take care of him. And if Ichinose tries to close in on Class A, it’ll be fun to crush her and toy with her. If she got expelled, I could watch Class B collapse.”

She smiled innocently, like a girl playing with dolls.

“I honestly didn’t foresee Ryuen-kun making a move, but...if he does come seeking a fight, then I’d like to do battle with him, too. Surprisingly enough, I might not be bored at this school after all.”

“That’s nice.”

“What are you going to do, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“If possible, I’d like to avoid anything that might make me stand out. I’ll just let Horikita continue to work hard.”

“And I’m sure she’ll astonish everyone with how much she grows. I am quite looking forward to it.”

Someday, Sakayanagi might be able to list Horikita’s name alongside Ichinose and Ryuen’s as an opponent she would be wary of. If that day came, I was sure Sakayanagi would enjoy her time at this school all the more.

“...There is one thing I’d like to apologize for.”

“Apologize?”

“Earlier, when I talked about the reason why I avoided a one-on-one match with you, I lied.”

She'd said she avoided it out of consideration for me, to keep attention from being focused on me. Now, she retracted that answer.

"To be honest, it's because I wanted to be with you, Ayanokouji-kun, even if for just one second longer," said Sakayanagi, offering her right hand to me.

I took it, thinking that she was going for a handshake. But she put her left hand over mine, enveloping it.

"People can come to know warmth by touch. And that is precious. The warmth of another's skin is by no means a bad thing. Please remember that."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's a belated message from me."

I stood there, still unable to understand what she meant. Sakayanagi slowly let go of my hand and started walking away.

"Now, then, shall we be going?"

It seemed she didn't intent to tell me anything else. As the two of us walked back to the dorms, we gazed at the setting sun.

"That reminds me, have you heard? Yoshida-kun from Class A, he..."

We didn't have the kind of relationship where you might reminisce about the old days. But we had no objectives in this moment, either. We were just talking about ordinary, everyday things. Just until the moment we arrived at the dorms.



Postscript

IT'S BEEN FOUR MONTHS. That's almost customary now. Four months. Even in the Reiwa Era, nothing has changed. I'm still your Kinugasa.

Volume 11 is done, and now, the first-year story arc has reached its conclusion. The students have safely made it to the closing ceremony, but we have a spring vacation story to tell before we get to the second-year. I'm planning for that book to be a story focused on the year in review, essentially, covering how the students have changed over the past year and how they'll continue to change. Also... there might be some romantic developments. But *who*?!

At any rate, now that I've finished the story arc for the first year, I just want to say, straight out...there ain't enough pages! I originally planned for Volumes 10 and 11 to be combined into one book, but that just ended up being totally impossible, right? Once I started writing, the page count just kept increasing and increasing. There were so many things that I couldn't even fit in two volumes!

When I start a new book, I'm always thinking to myself, *Ugh, maaaaan, how in the heck do I get this started? And how do I fill three hundred pages?*! But, before I even know it, it's like *The heck?! There's only a couple pages left?! I feel like this keeps happening more and more...* Which is why I'm thinking I'll carry over some of the extra things I wrote and put them in Volume 11.5.

Anyhow, let's have a little chat. On the rare occasions that I do meet someone who works in the industry, they usually tell me something like, "I have no idea what you're usually up to! Please get on social media!" Years ago, I pretty much had no choice but to do some blogging and such related to my work. But I guess, well...it's not that I don't *like* it, it's like I'm just really bad at it. So I thought that just giving updates in the postscripts of my books might be perfect for me.

As for what I usually do, well—I work, and I play golf once in a while. But I don't actually go to the golf course or anything (I'm bad at golf, it's not cheap, I have no endurance). I just hit balls at the driving range for about an hour or so and then I'm done. But that's enough to leave me satisfied.

Even if I did use social media, I'm sure I'd just be posting super dull stuff like that. So I guess I'll end my postscripts in a super boring way, too! See you again next time!



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